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**Business women's appearance management, career development,
and sexual harassment**

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Iowa State University, 1994

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**300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106**

**Business women's appearance management,
career development, and sexual harassment**

by

Patricia Anne Kimle

**A Dissertation Submitted to the
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ABSTRACT

Recent changes in women's business dress presented an opportunity to explore the social meanings conveyed by dress in a specific context. Combining qualitative methods of observation with interpretive and grounded theory analyses, this study contributes to our understanding of dress. The applicability of various theories of product symbolism and social behavior to women's business dress was explored.

The purpose of this study was to examine meanings of the perceived ideal image and actual image for women in business. It explored women's experiences with and feelings about the use of dress as part of their development as professionals. The study sought to facilitate insight into the dynamics of appearance in personal interactions, specifically among men and women at work. Perceptions of dress in cases of sexual harassment were explored.

Long interviews were conducted with 24 women in a variety of business positions. The interviews focused on women's experiences with appearance management, career development, and gender relations at work. The analysis explored the socially constructed ideal images for working women. The data were analyzed through grounded theory and interpretive methods.

A dynamic, multi-dimensional conceptual model of the meaning components women communicate in order to approach what they perceive as the "ideal" image was proposed. The six meanings identified were Conservatism, Fashion, Masculinity, Femininity/Sexuality, Creativity, and Conformity. Each of the meaning components must be consciously balanced by business women. Exhibiting too much of an individual meaning may endanger the image and destroy the individual's credibility. The state of balance of meaning components is

mediated by several contextual factors--the particular field in which a woman is employed, the position she holds, and her personal values. Attention to matters of personal attractiveness was an overall requirement of the ideal image which did not require balance with other meanings. Other findings explored general career development issues, the perceived origins of the ideal image, business dress concerns during maternity, and the relation between dress and sexual harassment.

INTRODUCTION

Dressing oneself is a daily activity for almost all people. It is a personal act which has consequences for individuals and for social relationships. Dress carries significant meanings and therefore has the power to communicate about the wearer. Consideration of the messages we want to send to others about ourselves can make the act of dressing a significant act in our everyday lives. For these reasons, it is appropriate for scholars to examine dress in every context.

The scientific study of dress as human behavior is a relatively recent endeavor and the field draws theory primarily from areas of psychology and sociology (Davis, 1984). Nagasawa, Kaiser, and Hutton (1989) suggest that if the field is going to develop its own critical mass of theory, researchers need to adopt multiple methodological approaches and be able to consider dress as behavior on both the concrete, observable level as well as the abstract, theoretical level. They further suggest that qualitative methods of inquiry are necessary to "build a better base of observations from which more abstract statements can be derived" (p. 29). In any scientific field, a balance needs to be achieved between research addressing both the abstract and the concrete levels.

The present study focuses on women's business dress as an opportunity to explore the social meanings conveyed by dress in a specific context and some practical applications of those meanings. Combining qualitative methods of interviewing with interpretive and grounded theory analyses, this study contributes to both our practical and theoretical understanding of dress in an attempt to answer Nagasawa, Kaiser and Hutton's (1989) call for

balance. On the practical, concrete level, understanding the experiences of dress for business women may be applied in the effort to assist women's use of the symbolic nature of dress toward their own career advancement. In addition, dress has become problematic in the negotiation of relationships among men and women at work; as a medium of communication, it is often inaccurate. This may lead to misinterpretations of dress messages, including sexual intent, which contribute to conflicts such as harassment. This study attempts to explore the perceptions held by women related to dress and sexual intent in order to further understand the problems of sexual harassment.

On the abstract level, the applicability of various theories of product symbolism and social behavior to women's business dress is explored. A theoretical model of the socially constructed ideal appearance for women's business dress is proposed. This model demonstrates the concepts involved in negotiating a social ideal for a specific context (business dress). Concepts from this model may be applicable in other areas of social interaction as well, thus contributing to theory about dress.

The Evolution of Women's Business Dress

In the 1970's and 1980's, as women began to enter the workforce in larger numbers than ever before, they sought to "fit in" with the business world. They found that to do this, they needed not only the professional qualifications, but they also needed to look and dress the part of a businessperson. John Molloy (1977) and many image consultants sought to advise women on achieving a professional look. Their advice was to adopt a "feminized" version of the man's business suit in order to minimize women's femininity and become

visually similar to men. This similarity was purported to aid women in being perceived as having just as much power and authority as men in business. Molloy and others told women to wear tailored, skirted suits in fabrics similar to men's suiting fabrics. Plain white or light-colored blouses and small neck ornaments were also prescribed. The fashion industry geared up to supply the wardrobes and women adopted the image in massive numbers (Faludi, 1991; Saunders & Stead, 1986). Some women began to recognize the need to reorganize their priorities in selecting clothing, focusing on dress as a tactical tool to achieve integration and success in the business world, rather than on the aesthetic value gained from the varied styles and colors of traditional women's fashions (Solomon & Douglas, 1985).

On observing this phenomenon in women's fashion and business dress, McCracken (1985) proposed that the mimicry of menswear and masculine symbols in women's dress would precipitate a change in fashions for men's business suits. According to the "trickle-down" theory of fashion, the evolution of fashion change is a mechanism which helps to maintain status differentiation among social groups. The highest status group has the power to initiate new styles and dictate the symbols of power and status. The adoption of symbols of a higher status group by a lower status group causes the higher status group to adopt new symbols in order to re-establish their differentiation from the usurpers. Applying the concepts of the theory, McCracken (1985) suggested that men's symbols--those of the traditional business suit--constituted higher status than women's polymorphic, polychromatic styles in the business arena, at least. He suggested that men would adopt new symbols in order to maintain the status-quo of power imbalance. His predictions have not yet been borne out by any significant changes in men's business images in the succeeding 10 years. In fact, women

have moved away from the severe prescriptions of the “dress for success” image and have once again incorporated much more variety in color, pattern and style into their business wardrobes. Fashion advisors now propose a wide variety of images for women in business. In fact, there was very little agreement among fashion columnists on what style features are appropriate dress for female career wear in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Paff & Damhorst, 1994).

These observations pose a number of questions: Why have women retreated somewhat from the restrictive use of menswear images and masculine symbols of power? How do women in the workforce feel about these changes in dress prescriptions? Is there as much confusion among women themselves about work role dress as Paff and Damhorst (1994) suggest women would feel if they read all the advice columns?

Appearance and Work Role Dress

Research has examined and established the importance of appearance in many aspects of social life, including work. In research focusing on the social-psychological nature of clothing, it has been found that appearance is important to processes of social interaction, particularly in impression formation and attribution of traits.

Although women are entering nearly all careers in the labor force in large numbers, women in business and higher management positions are still in the minority. Scholars have been researching women’s appearance and work roles in order to help women navigate the work world successfully. Much research has examined the effects of clothing variables on the perceptions of job interview candidates (e.g., Johnson & Roach-Higgins, 1987; Lennon &

Miller, 1984-85) and the attribution of job qualifications or competencies (Belleau, Miller, & Church, 1988; Forsythe, 1988; Goudge & Littrell, 1989; Thurston, Lennon, & Clayton, 1990). These studies have found varying degrees of significance for the effect of dress variables on likelihood of job acquisition or perception of positive traits for business. In general, more "appropriate" dress leads to higher judgements of stimulus persons' chances for success and promotion through the ranks in corporate business environments.

However, the findings of much of the research on women's business dress are limited by experimental designs; researchers provide pre-determined ranking scales for subjects to rate stimulus persons' dress and other characteristics. The conclusions for many of these studies can go no further than stating that dress is or is not a significant variable compared to other variables. At this point, however, research has come far enough in establishing the significance of dress to turn to exploring *why* dress is significant and what it means in individual women's business experiences.

Finally, many of these studies use undergraduate students as respondents, rather than professional women with experience in the work world. Results from studies using undergraduates may not be valid because students have less "real world" experience to draw upon when forming impressions and making judgments.

Little research has been found which examines the importance of dress from the point of view of women working in business professions themselves. The degree to which women themselves feel that dress is important, the emphasis they place on their appearances and effort they put into creating and maintaining their personal image has not been thoroughly established. Studies which have identified women's dress concerns did not initially intend to

explore appearances (Kanter, 1977; Sheppard, 1989), instead they were exploring women's work lives in a broader scope and dress was reported by their subjects as an important concept. Dress was identified as a concern to women but it was not explored in depth, nor was any theory of dress explored or applied in these studies. Hence more thorough study of women's work role dress is warranted.

Appearance, Sexuality, and Sexual Harassment

Deeply embedded in women's self-presentation as business professionals is their identity as female beings. One's gender is something that cannot be eliminated, or left at home, when one dresses for work in the morning. Women must combine being female with being professional. In women's history, these two roles were not always easily combined. In the past, if a woman sought a career, she was thought to be somehow less female or feminine than other women who were more traditional and sought only marriage and family. Old social norms for women included stereotypes about female characteristics which were considered inherently inappropriate in business (e.g., emotionality, irrationality). Social norms are changing and the characteristics of both men and women in business are becoming more valued. However, some of the old ideas about gender roles are still operating and women have to find ways to respond to them. While women cannot, and most would not, deny their female gender, it is a symbolic property of the self which is seen as requiring careful management (Sheppard, 1989).

Women face stereotypes concerning not only female characteristics, but also concerning communications of sexual intent which can threaten their credibility as

professionals. Stereotypes such as “the more attractive the person, the more interested in sexual attention they are” may leave women feeling vulnerable to harassment or misinterpretation of their professional behaviors (Gutek, 1989). In addition, research continues to find the operation of stereotypes among various groups which indicate the belief that women, by their dress alone, can invite sexual harassment and sexual abuse. These types of stereotypes can increase the difficulty of the negotiation of relationships between men and women at work.

Again, most research assessing perceptions of sexual intent in work contexts uses women as stimuli and compares perceptions of various subject groups. The experimental designs, which often call for responses on numerical rating scales, allow for little discussion of the meanings of sexuality in dress images or for the reaction or response of women to the operation of stereotypical beliefs being tested and established in the studies. Little research has been found which explores the negotiation of sexuality and appearances from the point of view of working women themselves or probes the meanings of these concepts for women's everyday business experience.

Purpose

Creating a professional image for business is a challenge for women because the norms for professional women's appearance are nebulous, contradictory, and continue to change while women are earning their places as credible and competent members of the business community. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived ideal image and actual image for women in business and the meanings of those images as they are perceived by

women. It explored women's experiences with and feelings about use of dress as part of their development as professionals. The study sought to facilitate insight into the dynamics of appearance in personal interactions, specifically among men and women at work. The meanings of appearances for businesswomen were explored. Finally, the study examined the problem of sexual harassment and possible influences (if any) dress has, or is perceived by women to have, in harassment incidents.

Definitions

Appearance: The total, composite image created by the human body and any modifications, embellishments, or coverings of the body (Kaiser, 1990) that is perceptible to others.

Dress: (noun:) The total arrangement of all outwardly detectable modifications of the body itself and all material objects added to it (Roach & Musa, 1980). (verb:) The act of altering appearance (Kaiser, 1990).

Appearance Management: An active process of identity expression, bringing to the surface and embodying meanings that are not easily conveyed in words (Kaiser, Nagasawa, & Hutton, 1991) through conscious use of dress, physical mannerisms, language, and etiquette.

Sexual Harassment: Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that are connected to decisions about employment or that create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment (The Civil Rights Act, Title VII).

Sexuality: The nature or character of a person as a sexual being.

Feminine: Pertaining to traditionally held beliefs about social and behavioral characteristics of women in U. S. culture during the 20th Century.

Masculine: Pertaining to traditionally held beliefs about social and behavioral characteristics of men in U. S. culture during the 20th Century.

Research Questions

This inductive and interpretive study explored a broad number of issues related to appearance management as a part of career development. The following are general theme areas with embedded questions which were raised and explored. Other issues were allowed to arise throughout the interviews.

Professional Ideal Images

What characteristics of appearance do professional women identify as expressing the ideal professional woman? What sources of information and types of experience contribute to women's perceived ideal? Do women view this cultural appearance ideal as externally constructed and oppressive or do they feel that women themselves participate in constructing this image? How do they construct their own images in relation to the ideal? How does the ideal appearance for professionals affect women's images of themselves, i.e., do they accept the ideal and strive toward it, are they ambivalent about the ideal, or do they reject it?

Personal Differences

Women's experiences of gender relationships, dress and image concerns, and career development and success may vary based on personal differences. How do age, business

experience, and organizational roles or hierarchical status influence how women view appearance management needs?

Influence of Dress on Work Interactions

Do women believe that dress has any influence in interactions between women and men at work? More specifically, do women think that dress is an indicator to men about women's interest in or invitation to sexual advances by men? Do women try to use dress to create an image which they hope might discourage harassment? Do women's attitudes illustrate the victim mentality of attributing responsibility for harassment to women and their personally selected appearances?

Power in the Workplace

What appearance factors are perceived by women to aid in establishing or maintaining authority or personal power in the workplace which, in turn, contribute to professional success? Are the meanings associated with current fashionable appearances acceptable or detrimental to establishing an image of professional competence?

Dialogue with Theoretical Literature

This research takes an inductive approach in exploring the responses to the questions posed. While I attempted to remain open to the possibility of posing explanations and forming theoretical conceptions from the data, I have also sought to apply various theories which might explain the current variety in women's business dress codes. Warren's (1949) theory of behavior and symbol diversity during times of role change was explored, as was the

applicability of Solomon's (1983) perspective on Wicklund & Golwitzer's (1983) symbolic self-completion theory. In addition, I have considered various feminist conceptions of women's dress. The discussion explored the possible implications of or adjustments to existing theories implied by these findings.

This research takes an interpretive and grounded theory approach. Interpretive research seeks to identify the values and belief systems which structure the social behaviors of a group of individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is assumed that there are multiple realities inherent in any group and the goal of the research is to explore the variety in the experiences of individuals in the group. In this study, the opinions and beliefs of business women were explored, in order to understand women's work lives from the insider's point of view. A variety of opinions and attitudes was sought.

The grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) attempts to structure the identified belief systems of the insider into a coherent explanatory theory. The meanings which the participants of the study hold become the foundation of the theory posed. Grounded theory attempts both to explore possible application (and modification) of existing theories to the participant's experiences, and to pose new theory. In this sense, the theoretical propositions derived are "grounded" in the very experiences which the method attempts to understand and clarify.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study draws upon a number of topics and research areas which are tightly interconnected. First, the importance of a professional business image for women has been found to be a concern for women. But studies focusing on dress have not explored women's own perspectives on the problem. Second, recent changes observed in women's business images present questions about the current appearance codes for women and the reasons for those changing codes. Third, two theory areas--role change theory and symbolic self-completion theory--are explored as possible explanations for the women's business appearance codes. Various feminist perspectives also attempt to clarify the role of appearance in women's experiences. Finally, concepts of aesthetics are viewed as vital elements of women's culture. These theoretical areas must be considered as they may apply to the specific problems of women's experiences of sexual harassment.

Although these areas have been presented individually, they are complex, interconnected views on women's experience. The study of dress is a multi-disciplinary approach to a social phenomenon. As befits the interpretive approach, this study attempted to make use of a variety of initial frameworks to pose questions and direct the analysis.

Women and Professional Business Images

In interviews with women managers, Sheppard (1989) found that being female was a problem for them more often than any other type of personal attribute or work condition; women, therefore, sought to "manage" their femininity by carefully controlling their image at work. Women's "femaleness" (their difference from the male majority of business people) is

often focused on by both men and women in their experiences with each other at work. The female managers Sheppard interviewed included dress, language, and relationships as tools in their strategies for managing gender and "blending in" with corporate culture. These women were very concerned with appearance management in order to be seen as capable and credible and to be taken seriously.

As Kanter (1977) noted back in the 1970s, women in business have the inherent problem of always looking different from men. Their gender is worn like a target, susceptible to attack for two opposing reasons. Women must maintain their femininity and are punished if they look too much like men. Yet they may be suspected of being less capable of doing well in business if they look too feminine, since masculine appearances are associated with competence by both women and men (Forsythe, 1988). In a study of perceptions of female managers, Johnson, Crutsinger, and Workman (1994) suggest that the adoption of "feminized" men's symbols is the most effective approach for women's dress. They found that a female manager wearing a feminized version of a man's necktie [a scarf] was rated as more promotable than a woman adopting a man's necktie. Johnson et al. (1994) suggest that their findings indicate that women can be perceived as 'too masculine' in the workplace.

For women trying to negotiate the male-dominated world of work, finding the right way to dress can be very important for success in corporate culture. Women are not socialized to work comfortably in the male-dominated business world. They are taught to be aware of themselves and always on guard, and their appearance is one thing they feel they can carefully control (Gutek, 1989).

For the women in Sheppard's (1989) study, "femininity" was maintained through dress and personal image while "businesslike" was maintained through the use of stereotypically masculine behaviors; they tried to behave in a manner that was rational, competent, and impersonal. Women felt they needed to create a balance between femininity and a businesslike image. They must be feminine enough to fulfill traditional expectations of women and not disrupt a gender status quo; at the same time, they must act businesslike to minimize the fact that they are women.

Research has confirmed the significance of dress as a factor influencing perception of business characteristics in a variety of contexts. In numerous studies, the effects of clothing variables on the perception of stimulus persons in a variety of contexts, including the business environment and the job interview setting, have been tested through experimental design. Dress is frequently found to be a significant factor affecting perception of appropriate business and social skills. For instance, Johnson and Roach-Higgins (1987) and Lennon and Miller (1984-85) examined the effects of varying levels of physical attractiveness and dress appropriateness for business and other social settings, respectively. Both studies found dress to impact perceptions of traits, but other variables were found to be mediating factors. More importantly, Johnson and Roach-Higgins found dress to be a more significant factor than physical attractiveness in the business job interview context.

Studies have examined the impact of dress in combination with a variety of other variables and contexts on the attribution of job qualifications or competencies both in hypothetical business job interviews and in a general business setting. These additional variables have included age, body type and fashionability of dress (Thurston, Lennon, &

Clayton, 1990), fashionability of maternity career apparel and perceived job effectiveness (Belleau, Miller, & Church, 1988), and masculinity of career apparel style and gender of perceiver (Forsythe, 1988). Additionally, research has investigated the influence of reference persons (Rabolt & Drake, 1984-85) and women's so-called "feminist" orientations (Koch & Dickey, 1988) on women's attitudes towards professional dress.

The findings of these studies are often difficult to interpret or apply in the larger scheme of women's business experiences. The studies report findings which vary from only "slight differences" or "tendency toward higher (or lower) ratings" to statistically significant effects of dress on the conditions measured. Thus, the conclusions are drawn that dress does have an influence on the rating of stimulus persons' suitability for or likely success in business. While most studies examined the effects of dress *on* perception of job-relevant characteristics, few studies try to assess the importance of dress *among* or *relative to* other factors. In an attempt to gauge the importance of dress in the larger scheme of business, Goudge and Littrell (1989) found female applicants' dress to be rated less important than job skills but more important than luck by businessmen assessing these conditions for a job interview situation.

From this research, we conclude that dress is an important factor affecting women's business experiences. But how important is dress to women in the broader context of their daily business experiences? What are the underlying meanings inherent in dress images which affect perception of traits for business persons? The experimental designs undertaken thus far in the research on women's business dress cannot approach these questions. The present study attempted to explore women's business dress from the perspective of women themselves in order to approach these issues from a completely different direction. Taking an

inductive approach allowed exploration of these topics. This research not only identified dress effects in business experiences, but began to approach the questions of *how* and *why* dress has these effects. Further, the inductive approach allows these topics to be probed in greater depth than can ever be achieved through the application of numerical rating-scale responses.

Women's Business Dress and Fashion Change

In the 1970s, as women entered the business workforce in greater numbers, they found that not only were educational and personal qualifications required for their success in business, but they had to learn the rules and codes for behavior in what was an exclusively male arena (Kanter, 1977). Dress, they learned, was part of these codes. In 1977, John Molloy published the "Women's Dress for Success" book, in which he outlined for women a highly conservative business look and many of the personal behaviors, manners, and etiquette of the business community needed for "fitting in" and succeeding in a man's world. Women adopted on a massive scale Molloy's "uniform" for professional wear--the women's tailored, skirted business suit, modeled after men's traditional suits (Faludi, 1991). This suit consisted of straight skirts, tailored jackets and light, high necked blouses with a small, soft adornment at the neck such as a silk bow tie reminiscent of men's ties, but softened. The fabrics for this suit were similar to menswear suiting fabrics, and Molloy recommended neutral colors, especially gray (Molloy, 1977).

Molloy was not the only author to attempt to outline the rules for women to get into business and succeed. Another notable author is Helen Gurley Brown, editor of *Cosmopolitan*, who attempted to teach women how to "have it all" in their professional and

personal lives. Brown included chapters on dress, manners, and appropriate behaviors for a successful business career (Brown, 1982). In addition to the self-help books, the fashion press chimed in to help women learn to dress themselves for business (Faludi, 1991). The fashion industry complied with women's need for the suited look, reaping the benefits of women's newfound economic independence and increasing discretionary spending.

After a decade of neutral-colored, conservatively tailored suits, women's professional dress styles seem to have changed in the late 1980s. Women's businesswear style codes relaxed to include a wider variety of silhouettes, softer fabrics and brighter colors. Many writers in the fashion press are now promoting an array of advice, emphasizing that fashion is once again important for professional women and encouraging them to throw off the "shackles of tradition" (Paff & Damhorst, 1994). In interviews with employment recruiters, Damhorst and Fiore (1993) found that business employment recruiters are also looking for prospective employees who demonstrate a subdued degree of fashion or creativity in their dress. Appearing current and up-to-date is in part a reflection of business competence for women. These apparent changes inspire the questions: Why are women's business style codes changing so drastically at the end of the 20th century? Does "anything go" for women in business in the 1990s as the fashion press implies?

Role Change Theory

During times of change in social institutions, a broader range or variety of behaviors by individuals performing similar roles is likely (Warren, 1949). As women take more prominent roles in business, they bring changes to the social structure of the business

community. These changes create a period of confusion about appropriate behaviors of individuals, including behaviors concerning appropriate clothing styles and symbols. While women are becoming more prevalent throughout all hierarchical levels in businesses, greater variety in role dress should occur initially and then become more uniform as businesses settle into new patterns--with women in the ranks--if Warren's theory is correct. Warren's theory of role change and prescribed behavior may be one possible explanation of the diversity of women's current business style codes.

Symbolic Self-Completion Theory

Consumer behavior researchers assume that products are purchased and used not only because they satisfy utilitarian functions, but also because they hold symbolic meanings which are available to the consumer (Levy, 1959). Building from Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1982) theory of symbolic self-completion, Solomon (1983) proposed that individuals use objects (products) associated with symbolic meanings to help them to define and carry out social roles. Adopting appropriate appearance cues facilitates role performance. The more material cues/symbols the role player adopts, the more successful the role performance may possibly be. Solomon further suggested that individuals' dependency on the symbolic use of products varies due to three conditions. First, the degree of role knowledge or an individual's ability to enact the expected behaviors will be inversely related to that individual's dependence on or adoption of the material symbols associated with the role. Second, when the behaviors appropriate to a role are less concretely prescribed or are uncertain, individuals will also depend more on symbols of the role. Third, in periods of role change or role transition, when

an individual takes on new roles with different role requirements and behaviors, dependence on product symbols for the new role increases.

From Solomon's propositions, we can suggest some possible explanations for the current diversity of women's business dress which may be examined in this study. The first proposition suggests that one might find differences in the use of clothing symbolism and appearance cues between women in early career stages and women with more established careers. One might expect that younger or novice career women would adhere to a more limited and conservative range of business dress styles, adopting the traditional suit while older women with more experience might exhibit more freedom in dress style choices.

In career positions in which women are newly establishing themselves, and women's codes for behavior may not be as concretely defined (perhaps in relation to men's codes), Solomon's second proposition would suggest that women would depend or rely on clothing to symbolize their role. They would be very concerned about adopting the appropriate role symbols, and perhaps more cognizant of clothing choices as symbolic actions. And finally, when moving from one role to another, women might initially be more concerned about using clothing cues to communicate their new roles than when they become more comfortable and confident in those roles.

These propositions suggest that there might be great variety among women in different career positions and their reliance on traditional business dress symbols or their adoption of more diverse dress and appearances. From the macro level perspective, these varieties of use of business dress styles as symbolic of business roles among all women may offer insight to the diversity of dress styles promoted currently by the fashion press (Paff & Damhorst, 1994).

Some Feminist Critiques of Fashion

Another explanation for the current variety in women's business dress asserts that the fashion industry, as a capitalist enterprise dependent on women as consumers, was endangered by women's growing independence and autonomy in the 70s and 80s (Faludi, 1991; Wolf, 1991). The move away from a safe, conservative business uniform for women and back to "feminine" styles was, according to this theory, not only necessary to revive a failing industry, but necessary to reassert traditional norms for women--norms that encourage attention to appearance on the part of women and consequent spending on fashion. According to this perspective, the return to femininity in women's dress reflects a regressive move to denigrate women's successful professional images and re-create images of women as feminine, sexy, submissive, and traditional. It attempts to keep women engrossed in surface adornment and keep them from addressing "real issues in the real world". Faludi refers to this phenomenon as a cultural "backlash" and describes similar eras when women's liberation advances, such as in the late 1800s and in the late 1940s, were also accompanied by dramatic changes in fashions which allegedly promoted more traditionally feminine images of women.

One of the primary goals of feminist scholarship has been to expose norms for social behaviors of men and women and study gender roles as socially constructed, not biologically determined. Among the patterns of behavior which are examined and questioned by feminists is the concept of gendered appearances (Michelman, 1991). The perspective asks what constitutes feminine and masculine appearances and why are gendered images associated with certain characteristics and traits? For instance, why are men's tailored images considered serious, competent, and businesslike while colorful, soft and "feminine" appearances are not?

Feminist theorists generally have characterized the concept of fashion and the fashion industry to be institutions of capitalist, patriarchal oppression against women. Feminist authors in the genre of "popular psychology" have postulated that many of the cultural norms for female beauty and attractiveness often create painful and detrimental effects on women striving to achieve those standards. For example, Freedman (1986) explored possible relationships between women's self-image, cultural ideals, and physical and psychological problems for women (e.g., dieting, eating disorders, and obsession with fitness and aging). Likewise, Chapkis (1986) explored the injustices perpetrated against women based on personal appearances. Some writers note pressure on women to maintain their image through beauty products, changing fashions, cosmetics and fitness. These engagements can be very costly, diminish women's economic freedom, and occupy a great deal of time. They are, therefore, a form of sex discrimination to keep women from advancing in society and achieving equality with men (Wolf, 1991). In attempting to make their cases, feminist authors draw on examples which supports their views; they do not present scholarly tests of their theories. The hypotheses derived from feminist critiques of social institutions need to be thoroughly and rigorously explored before they are accepted as theory.

In addition, these feminist perspectives fail to recognize that there are also cultural ideals for men's appearances. Men are also consumers of fashion and grooming products through which they too create appropriate male images.

Marxist and socialist feminist theorists have also looked at the massive amount of capitalist industry associated with women's appearances. The fashion, beauty, and cosmetics industries exist through continued perpetuation of women's pursuit of Western culture's image

of a youthful, thin, beautiful female ideal (Hansen & Reed, 1986). Marxist scholars attempt to demonstrate that women are oppressed and exploited by the beauty industry and seek to articulate a vision for change.

An alternate view of fashion, articulated by only a few scholars, recognizes women's participation in defining and perpetuating ideals for female beauty and fashion (Evans & Thornton, 1989). Levine (1988) admitted that women, even liberated feminists, seem to have embraced fashion once again. Levine realized that "anti-consumerism" is not necessarily progressive for feminists. She suggested that there is something positive about buying new clothing that "...gives one a sense of engagement in the present, indeed, it expresses a spirit of hope about the future" (p. 42).

In a review of feminist scholarship and underlying western theory, Kaiser (1991) articulates three varieties in feminist schools of thought. First, Marxist feminism generally seeks dichotomous analyses of social life which characterize male culture as dominating female culture. Radical or cultural feminism seeks to describe, preserve, and value the aesthetic and creative expressions of female culture. Third, Kaiser described postmodern feminism as a creative, holistic, and contextual philosophy which allows for ambiguity and diversity. A postmodern feminist perspective on gender and appearances no longer seeks to deconstruct the perpetrators of oppression, but rather seeks to understand the linkages between the biological, cultural, sexual, social, and psychological dimensions of gendered individuals (Kaiser, 1991). This approach recognizes that women participate in the creation of social and cultural institutions and norms. From this view, fashion and the norms and ideals of appearance are not only driven by the "capitalist patriarchy" but by women themselves.

Through consumer demand, women are also involved in the complex process of fashion creation and adoption.

Aesthetics as a Valuable Component of Women's Experience

Aesthetic play with components of dress (colors, fabrics, style changes) has been the realm of women's fashion for the last two centuries (Kaiser, 1990; McCracken, 1985; Solomon & Douglas, 1985). Fashion provides a socially sanctioned opportunity for women to be creative and expressive in their daily lives. This creative outlet is important to many women; however, it may be perceived by administrators (mostly male) negatively in the business context. The gendered, feminine qualities of women's appearances currently promoted by the fashion media and popular culture stress women's sexuality over other characteristics and competencies.

In addition, being "in fashion" itself carries certain associations. Fashion means change. It implies that the wearer is willing to take risks, follow trends, and exhibits a certain disregard for tradition. Fashion does not connote stability, reliability, or resistance to change. However, these are meanings and qualities frequently fostered in business (Kanter, 1977). Maintaining an blatantly fashionable image could be at semiotic odds with the need to project professional, competent and stable images at work.

Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace

As national attention has recently focused on gender relations in the work place, the media is examining sexual harassment, rape, and civil rights. There is a great deal of confusion among men and women about definitions of acceptable and appropriate

interpersonal behavior and appearances in the workplace. It is important to examine and understand the problem of women's image and position at work as it relates to the problem of sexual harassment.

What is sexual harassment?

There are growing debates about appropriate definitions of sexual harassment. The Civil Rights Act, Title VII, defines sexual harassment as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that are connected to decisions about employment or that create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment." Some feminist authors have been seeking to expand the definition of sexual harassment to include any coercive behavior imposed upon members of one gender by those of the other gender due to conditions of unequal power associated with gender differences. Anytime men, who currently have more power in the business arena, force intrusive or unwanted behaviors on women--in any activity, not necessarily sexual behaviors--that coercion is considered sexual harassment (Wise & Stanley, 1987). For purposes of this project, I maintain a focus on the narrower definition of harassment in a sexual rather than the wider gender perspective. But I note the broader definition because it is a widely discussed concept, illuminating some of the underlying power structure differentials which are present in gender relationships for most individuals at work. DiTomaso (1989) stated that, "power differences existing in most organizations, which give men more authority and access to rewards and sanctions than women, enable the sexualization of the workplace and make it

possible for men to exploit women for their own benefit" (p. 73). This power structure allows harassment and harassment becomes a form of sex discrimination (DiTomaso, 1989).

Social scientists differ widely in their estimates of the occurrence of sexual harassment. One reason for difficulty in estimating occurrences is that many individuals view sexual behavior, advances, and banter as enjoyable interactions and positive components of the workplace. Men and women both have been found to believe sexual behavior at work is flattering to the targeted person; therefore, many people have a very liberal definition of acceptable behavior and do not generally feel or recognize certain behaviors as harassment (Gutek, 1989). Secondly, women who have harassment experiences are often reluctant to report them. They realize that harassment is very difficult to prove, that perhaps everyone would not be offended by the behavior which they experienced, and they frequently find it easier to switch jobs to alleviate the problem than to take action against the harassing individual. Thirdly, women are made to feel that sexual harassment is their fault. They internalize the social attitudes that "she asked for it," so admission of the problem is a tacit admission of either guilt or failure on their own part to act or present themselves correctly.

Recent media exposure of several high-profile sexual harassment and sexual abuse cases has demonstrated the problems women face in coming forward with their complaints and allegations. Perhaps due to a feeling of strength in numbers or liberation in coming forward, more women are determined to fight harassment and are registering complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (Adams, 1992). Even though more women may be tired of ill treatment and are taking action, lawyers working with harassment victims still do not hold out much confidence of winning to victims. Harassment trials, similar to rape

cases, are very difficult ordeals for victims because the victims themselves are usually put on trial. Women bringing sexual harassment allegations are often bringing them against men in powerful positions. Lawyers of male defendants tend to turn the accusations around and use stereotypes and rhetoric to place the blame on the woman, saying that she invited the sexual behavior through her image, her appearance, or demeanor. A Florida court has recently determined that rape victim's apparel is inadmissible as evidence (Do women's..., 1990), but in most cases in other states, the clothing of victims of harassment and rape may still be used as evidence. Lennon, Lennon, and Johnson (1993) argued that because clothing is an ambiguous and inaccurate form of communication and cannot be indicative of intent by victims "asking for" sex or attention to sexuality, it should not be considered as evidence in sexual harassment cases.

Stereotypes of victim responsibility

Stereotypes of male and female behavior and sexuality, often inaccurate, figure very strongly in the public's perceptions of both parties in harassment cases. There exists a tendency among women and men to assign responsibility for provocation of men's sexual behaviors to the victim in harassment and abuse situations. Clothing and personal appearance stereotypes (sexy and revealing versus modest and conservative dress) have been found to increase the perceived likelihood of a victim's responsibility for provocation of a harassment incident. Some of these stereotypes focus on the use of dress and cosmetics and depend on the sex of the person judging the victim (Johnson & Workman, 1992; Workman & Johnson, 1991). In general, the more attractive and sexy a woman appears, the more responsibility for

rape or harassment is assumed on the part of non-rapists and non-harassers. In addition, non-verbal behaviors and demeanor may also contribute to a woman being perceived as responsible for inviting or initiating sexual overtures from men.

These stereotypes are held by women themselves, as many believe that they are victims of harassment due to a failure on their part to present the correct image, to maintain businesslike behaviors and to mask their female sexuality (Sheppard, 1989). In addition, women may be confused about self-presentation and others' impressions of one's sexuality. Research has consistently found that men perceive and rate women as more sexual and rate women's behaviors as bearing greater sexual intent than women do on a variety of cues including clothing and appearance and non-verbal behaviors (Abbey, Cozzarelli, McLaughlin & Harnish 1987; Abbey & Melby 1986; Cahoon & Edmonds, 1987, 1989; Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986,). This would indicate that what women might perceive as neutral or safe, men might interpret as conveying sexual intent and interest.

Women are caught in a quandary by these stereotypes. They cannot simply abandon the uses of cosmetics, feminine clothing styles, or maintenance of personal images which may be the fuel for stereotypes. Indeed, women who do not attend to appearance are often considered "failures" as women. It is not easy to define these stereotypes; appropriate images shift due to changing ideals for women's (and men's) physical attractiveness, fashion changes, and social changes in role expectations. Furthermore, appearance images serve as indicators of power, authority, and success in the work world. The problem occurs when the appearance stereotypes for victim responsibility and images of success for women overlap (Spake, 1992; Stacey, 1992).

Due to the recent attention to the issue of sexual harassment, businesses, public agencies, and institutions are seeking ways to address the problem (Branstad offers..., 1992). Most are at least looking over their standards to make sure they have defined inappropriate behavior and grievance procedures. Others are looking for ways to curb harassment through educational, consciousness-raising programs for their employees. Some have even suggested that development and enforcement of dress codes might be one part of the solution to sexual harassment. Employers are beginning to recognize that harassment and discrimination are a cost to employers through the attrition of skilled and experienced female workers who change jobs rather than confront the often unresolvable problem of harassment. It is in the companies' as well as their female employees' interests to find solutions to these problems.

While research finds that dress influences perceptions of sexual intent and victim responsibility in experimental design rating situations, these findings may not suggest how these stereotypes affect people's daily experiences in business settings. The present study questioned whether women felt strong connections between the issues of dress and sexual harassment or felt them to be separate issues. Are women aware of or concerned about others' interpretations of sexual intent in their dress? Do women feel that more revealing or "sexy" dress leaves them more vulnerable to attack from men at work? Through the interpretive method and the use of participants with "real world" business experiences, these questions were addressed.

METHOD

In-depth interviews were conducted with women in a variety of professional and "white collar" office positions and at different levels of career advancement and success. The interviews focused on women's experiences with appearance management, career development, gender relations at work, and possible experiences of sexual harassment. The participants and I explored their concepts of socially constructed ideal images for working women, their personal relation to and feelings about those images, and their strategies for the creation of their own professional images.

Instruments

Interview schedule

The interview schedule (see Appendix A) was developed with six broad sections: 1) a discussion of the participant's background and current work situations and roles; 2) descriptions of their perceived ideal image; 3) discussion of the participant's personal interest in appearance; 4) perception of changes in dress issues over time; 5) the influence of dress on work interactions; and 6) sexuality issues at work.

The six sections of discussion were developed to probe specific questions related to various theories and perspectives reviewed. Much of the literature reviewed suggested propositions and/or hypotheses explaining aspects of women's experiences of appearance management and related issues. Therefore questions were developed to explore women's opinions about the issues and explore the "fit" of these propositions. For example, questions

concerning role playing and changes over time were developed to explore the applicability of Solomon's (1983) perspective on symbolic self-completion theory and consumers' product selection and use. Questions examined the propositions which were derived from the theory. Also, questions were developed which explored the applicability of the feminist conceptions of appearance norms as either oppressive or creative forces in women's lives.

Personal data sheet

A personal data sheet (see Appendix B) was prepared which requested information about the participant's educational level, occupation or position, name or type of business at which they are employed, number of employees in office or division, number of employees in the company, level of participant in the hierarchical structure of the business or organization, number of years of employment with present company, number of years of work experience, marital status, number of children, and age. Participants were asked to complete this sheet at the start of the interviews.

Stimuli

For the discussion in section four of the interview schedule, a set of 38 examples of women's career, casual and formal clothing was developed. These stimuli facilitated the exploration of specific styles and design details in appropriate dress images and allowed the interviewer and participant to share a frame of reference when describing appearances and clothing. The examples were taken from a variety of mail order catalogs and were chosen to represent a broad spectrum of possible work wardrobe choices. The examples ranged from traditional suits to more casual outfits of tops and skirts or pants. Suits with traditional

tailoring and basic silhouettes in various conservative colors and fabrics were included which were expected to be described as appropriate for work dress. Design details suspected as inappropriate for business attire, such as slit skirts, shorter skirts, feminine floral print dresses, ruffles, lace and “glamour” fabrics, were included to encourage participants to make both negative and positive evaluations of the examples. In addition to using the examples in the second theme section of the interview, the samples were often used by the interviewer and participant for reference examples during other aspects of the interview discussions.

Procedure

Participants

The participants in this study were residents of Des Moines and central Iowa. Des Moines is the largest metropolitan center in Iowa. It has a relatively conservative business and social climate, often considered representative of urban centers throughout “Middle America.” Although the specifics of appropriate business images and dress styles of women identified in this study are not expected to be representative of business styles for women in other major metropolitan centers, the larger goal of exploring the meanings of dress experiences may not be specifically tied to dominant style trends or business climates. Exploring the meanings of dress can and should be performed in a variety of contexts, including the experiences of women in “middle America.”

Participants were selected through four purposive sampling methods. Through these sampling methods, care was taken to achieve a sample which was balanced across a range of ages, levels of career advancement, and a variety of occupations and business fields. First,

two participants were identified and contacted upon the recommendation of a legal professional who had worked with them in sexual harassment cases. Second, thirteen participants were selected from a group of women recommended by the Alumni Relations Coordinator for the College of Family and Consumer Sciences at Iowa State University. Third, three participants were business colleagues of the investigator's husband. And finally, the snowball technique, through which previously interviewed women were asked to recommend friends or colleagues to participate, identified the remaining six women in the sample. Through these sampling methods, more names than were needed were solicited. The characteristics of age, occupation or job title, and particular fields were identified prior to inviting potential participants. This information allowed the targeting of a wide range of ages and women in higher ranks in business.

Women were contacted by telephone, introduced to the interviewer and the goals of the study, and then asked to participate (see Appendix C for the contact script). Participants were informed that the interviews would be kept confidential and anonymous. Informed consent to the conditions of the study was implied by participants' agreement to participate. The procedures and instruments employed in this research were reviewed and approved by the Iowa State University Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research.

Interviews were conducted at the participant's place of business or home, or at a public restaurant or library during a mutually agreed upon time. The interviews ranged in length from one to two hours with most concluded in about one and one-half hours. The participants were asked permission to tape the interviews and were informed that they could

choose to turn the tape recorder off at any time or elect not to answer any questions. None of the participants objected to taping or elected not to answer the questions.

In total, 24 women were interviewed. An initial goal was a sample size of thirty. However, as consistent with the intentions of qualitative research, it is more important to sample to the point of redundancy in participants' responses, rather than achieve a certain sample size. After more than 20 interviews, it was decided that a sufficient range of individuals had been sampled and that the range of responses was no longer expanding.

Researcher

In interpretive research, the researcher is considered a "human instrument" in the research process. In this respect, the observations, intuitions and feelings of the researcher are considered valid and useful aspects of data collection and analysis. For instance, the researcher is trained to be perceptive of and flexible enough to pursue opportunities for in-depth exploration of a topic during an interview, rather than strictly following the interview schedule in order and structure of questioning. Likewise, the researcher's interpretations of the data become the principle result of the study, therefore the researcher must be thoroughly grounded in the material at hand. In addition, the researcher must be sensitive to and aware of her own personal perspectives which influence the direction and result of the study.

I have had training as an interpretive researcher through several courses which focused in part or totally on qualitative research methods and theoretical approaches. Through all of my program of study I have primarily chosen the interpretive, inductive approach to research. Over the past five years, I have gained experience in various qualitative and interpretive

research approaches and methods through studies ranging from course projects, research assistantship duties, and a master's thesis project.

In addition to my interest in the social processes of dress, I have also had extensive experience with study of the aesthetic nature of dress. I have studied and taught aspects of aesthetics and design of clothing and co-authored an extensive review of the field of aesthetics both within and outside the study of dress. Thus, I felt highly qualified to explore connections between subtleties of variation in the aesthetic features of dress and the meanings of those dress features.

Data Analysis

Conceptual operations in a grounded theory approach Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), themes in the data were identified and organized into categories and applied to the data in a constant comparative method. Coding begins with "unitizing" or identifying useful "chunks" of meaning, including expressions of ideas or concepts in the data. Unitizing was performed on the data by beginning with four transcripts randomly selected from the set and making initial coding notes beside the text. Second, Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest organizing steps which they refer to as concept identification and categorization. Through these steps, themes identified in the coding notes were condensed and organized into groups of concepts and an initial coding guide was developed. Open coding is Strauss and Corbin's (1990) process of applying the coding guide and testing its applicability and accuracy. Through open coding, the assumptions and interpretations of the data inherent in the coding guide are questioned. The researcher must

ask herself if her interpretations of statements in the data are congruent with the perspectives of the participants. Through processes of open coding, the validity of the coding guide is established. In the present analysis, the coding guide was applied to subsequent transcripts and continually revised throughout the process of coding all the data. The transcripts were checked a second time to make sure changes and additions made to the coding guide during later transcript coding were applied to earlier coded transcripts as well.

The coding guide developed was quite detailed and extensive. Codes in the data were fairly concrete concepts represented in the participants' statements. Therefore, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) processes of axial and selective coding and modeling were employed to conceptualize broader and more abstract thematic categories from the data and to develop and organize a conceptual model for examination and discussion. Axial and selective coding are attempts by the researcher to identify higher order abstractions, make connections between concepts and comparisons among contexts of coding incidence.

Modeling is a process of mapping or charting the processes involved in the phenomenon of interest. In the present analysis, the broader abstract concepts developed through axial and selective coding were arranged in order to demonstrate relationships among the codes. Initially, several of the concrete codes from the coding guide were organized together to form more abstract codes. For example, several codes demonstrating more specific relationships to the concept of fashion were observed and grouped. Contextual comparisons found that these concepts were often juxtaposed against concepts of meaning which were later organized into a larger category of conservatism. These connections were mapped in various ways in order to find a graphic structure which was both parsimonious and

explanative. Thus, in the analysis section of this report, these abstract, conceptual themes were presented and supported by quotations from participants. The concepts are presented as they relate to the model which was developed through the mapping process. Theoretical implications are presented and explored where appropriate throughout the results and discussion.

Concrete operations The interviews were transcribed using a computer word processing program for later analysis using grounded theory techniques. The unit of analysis was the entire interview. Similar themes emerged throughout the interview in response to various different questions, therefore an analysis of the data examining responses to each separate interview question was not performed. The number of participants who responded with the themes was important, rather than the incidence of particular themes within a transcript.

In order to establish the trustworthiness of the data coding, a second coder read through and checked the transcripts after the coding was completed. The second coder made note of any areas where she disagreed with certain codes or suggested other codes. The two researchers met after the coding of each group of 4-6 transcripts to negotiate disagreements and to discuss changes to the coding guide. Discussion and negotiation was carried out until consensus was reached on all points.

Coding and analysis was carried out "by hand" using paper copies of the transcripts. Computer analysis programs were deemed inappropriate due to the nature of the data. Since the unit of analysis was the entire interview, and similar codes appeared in various locations in the transcripts, manipulation of the data via a computer program would have been intensive.

In addition, entering codes into the programs often takes a great deal of time. It was judged that the time spent would decrease the efficiency and expediency of the analysis in this case. Because the analysis included exploration of the frequency of theme incidence across participants rather than within interviews, there was little need to use a data management program to tabulate frequencies or compile all examples of each coded theme. Finally, the discussion focused on broader themes than those employed in the data coding. These themes were not initially coded in the data, they were developed through axial and selective coding and modeling and organized during the discussion. For each broad theme in the discussion, several more concrete coding categories may have been included. Therefore, after the broader conceptual model themes were identified, re-coding data in the computer would have been necessary.

After the transcripts were coded, a summary sheet was compiled by hand for each transcript which listed the codes which were applied to the data and the page numbers on which the codes occurred. The demographic characteristics of each participant were also listed on this summary to facilitate comparison of responses by age, occupation, hierarchical level, and years of experience. Codes were totaled across all transcripts in a master summary sheet for easy reference and comparison of themes during analysis and discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented in four sections. First, a general section includes description of the characteristics of the participants and the general career issues which were of concern to these women. Second, appearance management themes pertaining to the ideal business image for women are presented in the form of a theoretical model. The model and its components are described and then discussed. This section includes a discussion of the social processes contributing to the ideal image and a dialogue with the theoretical literature which provided the organizing framework for the study. Third, the exploration of two special cases of women's business appearances--casual day and maternity--underscores the importance of appearance for working women. Finally, the issue of sexual harassment as it was perceived to relate to dress is discussed.

Although the findings of the interviews were organized into thematic categories in a master coding guide, findings are not presented at that level of specificity. Rather, the codes and themes were reorganized into broader concepts such as those presented in the model of the ideal business image for women. Appendix D presents the coding guide and all the categories illustrated by various participant statements.

General Information about Participants and Career Development Issues

Participants' demographic characteristics

Twenty four women employed in various companies and agencies in Des Moines and Ames, Iowa, were interviewed during November 1993 through February 1994. The

participants ranged in age from 24 to 71 years. The median age was 44 years. The participants' ages were fairly evenly distributed between 24 and 59 years (see Table 1).

All of the participants had completed some advanced education after high school (see Table 2). The majority had earned bachelor's degrees.

Table 1. Age of participants

Age Range	Number of Participants
21-30	4
31-40	6
41-50	7
51-60	5
over 60	1

Table 2. Educational level of participants.

Highest educational level achieved	Number of participants
High school diploma	0
Some college or technical school	8
Bachelor's degree	13
Graduate or professional degree	3

The participants were employed in a variety of business professions. Five participants worked in various aspects of the insurance industry; five in business service organizations, four in media organizations, three in public administration, two in banking and two in marketing. Half of the participants' positions included management activities. These women held positions of some responsibility; this was indicated by the responses to the item asking them to locate themselves on a hierarchical level of their organizations (see Table 3). Women at higher levels of authority were successfully sought for this study; however, two of the four

women at the highest level in their organization were the proprietors of small businesses. For two women, the hierarchical model was not applicable; one was self-employed and the other worked for the president of a philanthropic foundation. Also, the lowest hierarchical levels were sparse because middle- and upper-management level professionals were targeted for the study.

Table 3. Participants' perceived level in organizational hierarchy

Hierarchical level		Number of participants
(low)	1	1
	2	1
	3	5
	4	6
	5	5
(high)	6	4

The participants identified for this study had a great deal of experience in the business world. The range of years they had worked outside of the home is 3 to 32 with a median of 19.5 years. Most of the participants were married (17). Three were single, three divorced and one widowed. Nineteen of the women had children.

While it was earlier stated that this study is valuable because it addresses the experiences of women in Des Moines, Iowa, as indicative of populations in many metropolitan centers throughout the Midwest, it should be noted that many of the participants' positions required that they participate in business at the national and even international levels. The majority worked for companies whose business interests, and thus the participants'

responsibilities, extended beyond Iowa and the Midwest. Few of the participants' business experiences would be considered insular or restricted to the Des Moines area.

General career development issues

Appearance management is only one of many issues which the participants talked about concerning career development. An overriding theme, of which appearance management is only sometimes a part, is the pursuit of equality for women on the job and the reality of being female in the male dominated work world. Fifteen of the participants made comments which were classified in this category. Many of the comments refer to participants' views of the extent to which women have managed to establish themselves in business and their observations about the current climate in business for women. Several of the women did not believe that women have made great progress in achieving equality and that men still dominate the business world. An insurance industry manager saw women's position this way:

I'm here to tell you there aren't very many women in managerial spots. And when they're there they, most of the time they're not going to get into top management. They're going to hit a ceiling. ... I have always worked mainly in a male dominated career. And for only one reason, it's because I need the income. Supposedly it's higher if you do that. Of course, in reality it is not--in many cases. (Participant #1)

While the majority of the women felt that women's advances in business were authentic and wide-spread, four felt that much of the apparent advancement of women was misleading:

I think they make a big effort to make it look like they have [improved things for women]. I don't think they have. [Q: Who's they?] The big boys, the top, the top layers, right under the president. Because of the discrimination things out there. The company I worked for was very big, especially at corporate, to make it look like they were promoting women. And they didn't do it in any of the company. They talked like they did do it. [Q: So they tell you that you can go a long way here and there's

no evidence that women are doing it?] Yes. They talked in their annual reports and things that they do this and they go out and recruit women but they didn't really do it. (3)

Many other comments about women's status compared to men's in business referred to perceptions of business capabilities. While the participants felt that women can perform just as effectively in business as men, some felt that women are still hampered by misconceptions. Some of these ideas pertain to stereotypical beliefs about psychological and social behaviors of women and men.

The men in personnel, you find this out, men still have a tough time with women because they say that women managers are more emotional and they're more empathetic. They make better managers as a rule, but men see that as negative and not a positive. (3)

If you want to be perceived as a manager or perceived as someone in charge, which down here, especially when you have six people with only one male in the office, people tend to want to go to the man. (23)

Responses in this category presented what participants viewed as the "facts of life." Regarding appearance facts of life, women recognized that business is dominated by men and that male standards are generally applied to women as well. Because of this, many recognized the need to de-emphasize their feminine appearances to fit in. The degree to which this adaptation was comfortable to women varied. Some women regretted the need to choose more severe styles for their business wardrobe.

One woman went way up the ladder, they hired her away from an accounting firm and she went into the holding company and really moved way up. All she wore was suits and they were navy or gray and little ties. That's all she ever wore. [I didn't wear] anything that was too feminine. I always wore white starched blouses. I wore the suit, I just didn't like them very well. [Q: Does that one with the ruffle [example] seem too feminine?] Yeah, that's the kind of thing I like, but...I probably would not have worn it. (3)

In contrast, a female administrator demonstrates that not all women felt that the adoption of a business image was necessarily oppressive to women, just a matter of business sense:

Well you know I haven't thought a lot about it, but to me it would because a woman that's dressed in the softer, more feminine--what I put on projects how I want others to view me and in a business situation, I don't want people to see me as a woman as opposed to a man. I want them to see me as manager or as a director or as a leader, without regard to gender and so if I wore clothes that drew attention to my gender, then that would be asking them to think of me in that unique way. So I guess the clothes that I would wear might be characterized as--they're not masculine in that I'm not trying to put on a man's suit to look like a man, but I'm trying to minimize the effect of the feminine. [Q: Why do you think we do that? Why do we have to do that?] Oh, because I think that people sometimes think of women as being--if they think of the feminine side of them, they might think of them of a soft side and maybe not as serious. [Q: Is there some part of male characteristics that is set aside or put away when they're in their business suits?] Yeah, I don't think they wear their cowboy clothes to work. You know, the men that I know that come to work, they don't dress that way at home, they don't dress that way when they go out on the week ends. They put on a suit of clothes that says, okay I'm in my serious mode now. So I think that it's true for men, too. I don't think men are trying to look more feminine at work. I don't necessarily think that they're trying to look more masculine at work. They're just trying to look more serious at work. (15)

While the social norms for women now include being competent at work, old expectations about women tending to their appearance are also applied to their performance in the workplace. These participants felt that the norms for women's business images now include attractiveness requirements. Similar appearance features, such as body types, attractiveness and age characteristics, for women and men do not equate to the perception of similar characteristics. For instance, they believed that it is more acceptable for a man to be overweight than for a woman in business. And a gray haired man may be considered "distinguished" while a gray haired woman is just "old." While these social norms act as

means by which women are denied equality, among these participants, there was an attitude of acceptance of this as another “fact of life”:

One of my colleagues, who I work very closely with, is a woman who oversees about a 12-14 million dollar budget. You would say that that's a fairly responsible position. But she's very petite and I have watched her struggle for recognition, some sort of foothold of power, simply because she's a woman and she's so small. Whereas, we also have small men and they don't seem to carry that kind of stigma. We have large men that are perceived as powerful, in powerful positions. What they say carries a lot of weight and yet, if they were a woman they probably would not be accepted because they are overweight--I mean clearly overweight. I don't think women would be even accepted let alone granted any power. And as I've always said, as women we have so much more to do than just hop out of the shower, shave, and get dressed. We have to do something to our hair. We have to do something to our faces. Women just don't go out bare-faced in our society. That's part of our polish, part of our dressing. [Q: Sounds like you resent some of those things?] Definitely, definitely. I think there's resentment there, but I also think, when you get to a certain stage in your life, you get to a point, where, well, there's just some things and that's the way that they are. I don't mean to necessarily sound complacent with that. But you spend some time being angry and resentful that, oh, that you're not allowed the same power and the same perks and so on and so forth. But then you just get over it and go on. Because it's with you all the time, it's always there. I think women have come a ways in forty years, but in some ways, some days it seems like we're not as far as we should be. (16)

The Ideal Business Image for Women

In order to successfully carry out the role of businesswoman, one must construct for oneself the appropriate appearance. Kaiser, Nagasawa and Hutton (1991) define appearance management as “an active process of identity expression, bringing to the surface and embodying meanings that are not easily conveyed in words” (p. 171). In the business context, appearance management communicates one's identity as a business person, including meanings of professionalism, competence, credibility and company loyalty. These are meanings which can't be conveyed in words but are necessary to business success. This study

suggests a conceptual model of the concepts women embody through their appearance management to approach what they perceive as the business “ideal.”

The participants in this study all agreed that there is an ideal business image for U. S. women today. However, there was a great deal of variety in the specific appearances which these women found important to this image. As Solomon and Douglas (1987) found that the criteria for appropriate business attire consisted of a “fuzzy set” of varied features, this study also found that no exact archetype is agreed upon as the ideal image. Although no specific style features or appearance details were consistently identified as contributing to an ideal business image, the concepts underlying the ideal were thoroughly engaged in participants’ responses.

Six concepts were identified in the responses as meaning components which contribute to women’s ideal business image: Conservatism, Fashion, Masculinity, Femininity/Sexuality, Creativity, and Conformity. In the model of the ideal image for business women, these concepts are represented as three pair of polar opposites which exert pull on the individual (see Figure 1). They are conceptualized here as polar pairs, but, in actuality, they appear not to be true opposites. The dichotomies are blurred, and the concepts are overlapping. However, the participants often used the terms in each pair in opposition and to define each other.

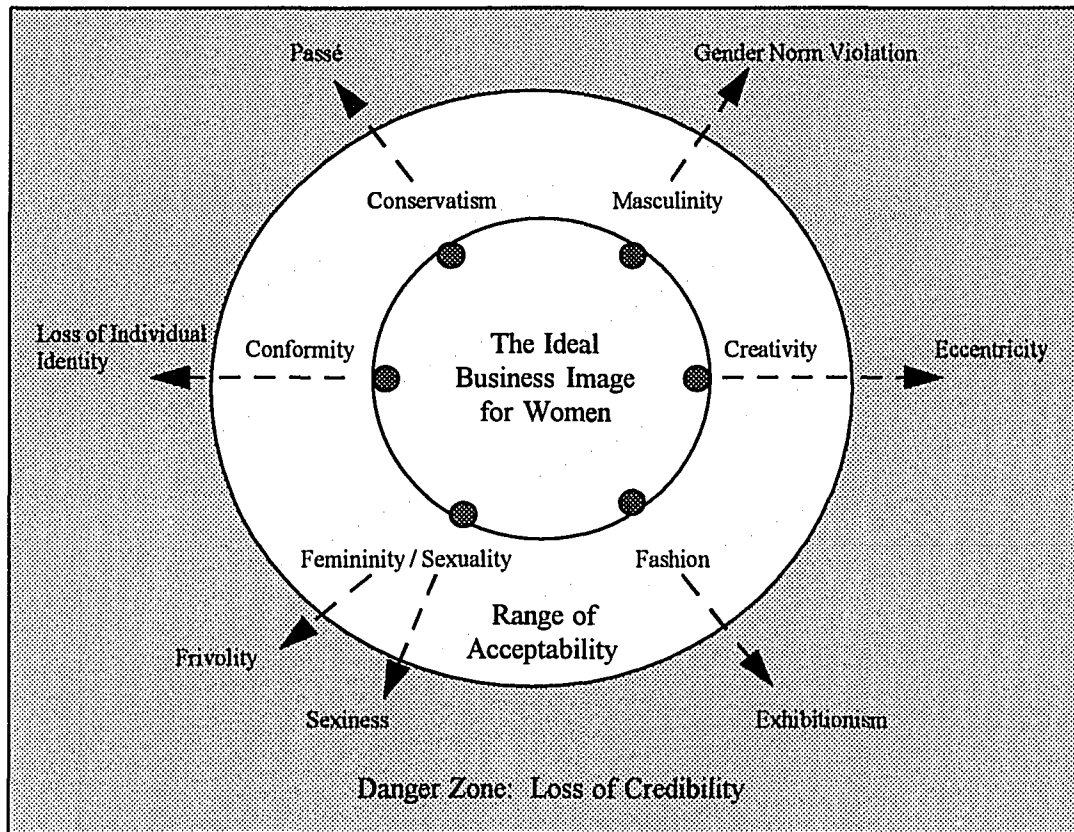


Figure 1. Grounded theory model of the meaning components involved in the ideal business image for women.

The pull among the meaning components is not necessarily equal, and therefore they need to be balanced through conscious and careful attention by business women. For each pair of opposites, women are placed somewhere between the concepts. This mutual pull creates for women a degree of tension which may or may not be comfortable. This tension may be felt only subconsciously; at the beginning of several of the interviews, I sensed the feeling on the part of the participants that dress was a rather trivial subject or not a concern. But as the interviews progressed, these women often became more aware of the dimensions of dress which can be problematic for women.

As the model in Figure 1 demonstrates, for each component which must be balanced in the ideal, there is an extreme which must be avoided. Exhibiting too much of an individual meaning may endanger the image and destroy the individual's perceived credibility. Further, the balance of components required to maintain the ideal image is mediated by the particular field in which a woman is employed, by the position or level of authority she holds, and her personal tastes and attitudes.

The opposition of dichotomous concepts in appearance was characterized by Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton (1991) as a form of ambiguity in the construction of social ideals. They proposed that in the postmodern era, individuals are faced with a variety of cultural ambivalences that provide them with opportunities for choice in dress messages. When faced with such possibilities, individuals may take advantage of ambiguity to express themselves relative to one or another cultural position. Ambivalence in dress is converted into a social statement about what an individual values and what one disregards. In contrast to Kaiser et al.'s (1991) perspective, these findings and the model generated here suggest that a woman

must choose appearance forms which exhibit opposite positions simultaneously. Women do not have the option of choosing one alternative and ignoring another. Therefore, the processes of appearance management in the business context can become complex and even perplexing for women. These findings perhaps more accurately portray the concept of ambivalence in dress, that of being torn between many options, than the Kaiser et al. (1991) examples.

That's not as professional looking, but it depends on the company. This [example] could get by. But I don't think it's as appropriate as some of these others. It might be too casual. I don't know, I suppose some would think it's okay, though. (20)

This woman's uncertainty was due to the fact that she apparently felt the "casual" example she was discussing did not exhibit a balance of all the meaning components. The degree of "casualness" was too extreme. Her comment that others might be comfortable with that example demonstrates that there is a high degree of tolerance of ambiguity and variety in women's business dress. This may be a feature of the post-modern cultural era (Kaiser et al., 1991). Another woman had recently become more conscious of her dress and had not yet come to a comfortable equilibrium for herself.

It's a tremendous situation I'm in. I've become more cognizant [of dress] in the last four years. I've begun to move forward in significant ways in my career. And I've had to step back and say, 'who is my peer group and how do they look?' But it's not always easy, figuring that out. I think it was at times, that I was all of a sudden more aware. I saw something happening in my life and I'd say, 'Okay, how does one behave, and how does one act, and how does one look?' As well as assuming these new kinds of responsibilities. So for me, I'm not sure how to evolve in some ways. (24)

Finding and maintaining a balance between these opposing forces was often perplexing for the women in this study. Because the successful negotiation of ambivalent dress messages

(or lack thereof) has economic as well as social consequences in the business context, it may take on great importance. For women in business, balancing all the issues involved in appearance can become like running a mine field.

A woman has a lot more barriers to breach. And fashion and beauty is one of them, because of our culture. You can't look too sexy, but you've got to look good. You've got to attract just enough attention so that they know you're there. It's a difficult line. (3)

Conservatism versus fashion

The first dimension of the ideal image is the conservative-fashion continuum. Conservatism in dress was often framed in opposition to "fashion" and vice versa. Fashion, by its very nature is exhibited through an openness to change; fashion is flexible whereas conservatism is the resistance to change or the choice to maintain the status quo. While conservatism in dress is exhibited by classic and traditional styles, fashion is trendy. A young woman demonstrated her concept of conservatism this way when she evaluated an example of business wear:

That looks a little too... It makes too much of a fashion statement. It's just not very classic, so to me, that doesn't really appear real professional. (13)

The participants generally held one meaning on a continuum higher than the other, but could not completely discount the opposing force. Maintaining a balance between conservatism and fashion keeps an individual from being perceived in either extreme--passé or out-of-date, or as an exhibitionist--either of which may discredit the image of professionalism.

Conservatism was perhaps the most salient priority for these participants; 16 women commented on the fact that the general business standard was "traditional" or "conservative".

In fact, some participants simply described “professional” in terms of appropriateness for business, while other participants whose highest priority seemed to be conservatism held “professional” and “conservative” synonymous. These were generally the first terms which participants used to describe the image they attempted to maintain. Often the terms professional and conservative were used to define each other.

I think the image I try to put together, whether in appearance or action or whatever, is straight-forward, *professional*, honest, clean-cut, *conservative* [emphasis added]. Not real flashy. Generally speaking, its suits. Pretty basic and conservative. (11)

When the discussions moved into descriptions of specific clothing styles, “conservative” was most often defined by the participants as a very tailored, suited look, similar to the male business image. Conservatism was demonstrated for these women through muted colors and basic, classic styles. It involved a slight up-dating of the “dress for success” dictum, including a broader variety of colors and some patterning in fabrics.

The traditional, conservative image originated in menswear styles. In 1666, Charles II of England declared the three-piece suit for men the standard uniform of business and commerce (Kuchta, 1990). Of course, men’s images have undergone change in the past three centuries, but that change is slow compared to the evolution of women’s styles. Thus, the basic and unchanging nature of men’s suits is the visual epitome of conservatism. Conservatism in women’s dress was predominantly viewed as a mandate to be as unchanging in style as men. In discussing how the ideal professional image is created, women frequently compared ideas of conservative and professional images of women to men’s business suits:

I think it comes from the fact that it started out as a man’s business world. And women slowly evolved into it and kind of adapted the similar type of look. (11)

Another woman had a similar response:

[Q: Why do you think the suit has become the professional standard?] Well, it could be that that's the way it started and tradition just carried it on. (15)

Women seemed to be aware of a need to maintain consistency in a business image. They recognize that one of the meanings associated with men's unchanging image is stability. One woman was very attuned to this concept in dress:

[Q: Do you think women's business image is changing?] Well, you see your key point here is *women's fashions* [emphasis added]. Men's fashions have not [changed]. Reichart's [menswear store] loves to say "we carry the same suit we did in '58." So you see, men can only judge on what they know. And they have always been unchanged. They've always been the rocks, they've been the steady people. All these fluttery little women, little pink collar people, who cares? (1)

Not only were these women aware of the stability of the conservative image, they believed that mimicking the conservatism of menswear dress is a successful strategy for women to adopt. They seemed to think that such an image contributes to women's authority, particularly at higher levels in an organization.

I think the women in the executive ranks pretty much dress in conservative kinds of suits. There's an expectation in the type of suit you wear, that it be well constructed, and that it be a good quality material. (15)

Even though a strong degree of conservatism was the primary priority for most of these women, they realized that some fashion change cannot be completely avoided or its effect discounted. While they felt the need to change with the times, some women did not see this change as "fashion" change; they felt the concept of "fashion" belonged to other categories of the apparel market. However, even in the conservative realm of business dress styles, fashion still exerts change. The changes are simply more subtle and evolve more slowly than in other garment markets. If a woman were to totally avoid the concept of fashion in her

wardrobe, she could become “too conservative” in her appearance. By not keeping the “conservative” wardrobe up to date on the latest fashion driven variations of “classic,” it can become passé.

I don't think people ever think about fashion in business. I don't think about it as such. It's more an updating. Keeping your image updated--if you didn't, people would think you weren't keeping updated in other facets of the business. (3)

It all works it's way through. So I just like to incorporate elements where I think. I don't want to look like I'm still dressing the same way I did 10 years ago so I like to update. With the traditional. (17)

I don't want people to focus on what I'm wearing. I'd rather have them focus on what I'm saying. But I always want to look nice. I don't want to look dowdy or unfashionable. (15)

Attention to fashion could be a priority for the maintenance of a professional image, as well as a matter of personal taste or interest for women. While those in more conservative industries such as insurance and finance felt that fashion was only important in order to avoid becoming passé, for some a more fashion forward appearance was a priority to communicate about their job competencies. Public relations and media positions were examples of careers in which women felt that fashion was a significant priority.

As far as fashion then, you need a fashionable, up-to-date appearance. I tend toward the traditional and sort of classic type. Part of that would be my stature, I'm tall. For myself, I would be pretty classic, but not always just basic. There has to be something unusual about it even if it's off-white. (12)

We have a number of women who dress in great style. I mean they have very stylish clothes, haircuts, even if it's a little more casual, it's very, very stylish. That goes with our territory because being in this environment, we are writing stories and producing publications that need to be up to date and up with the times. (14)

Participants in more conservative fields felt that following fashion as a personal priority was generally okay for business. They recognized several positive aspects of oneself and one's professional abilities which can be communicated through an interest in fashion.

Well, I guess [following fashion] means you're on top of things and you obviously read. Which is good. (2)

[A fashionable person is] someone who has the ability to take from a fashion as it changes that which is complementary to them and incorporate it into [his or her] life and that takes some creativity and talent. (8)

Others felt that demonstrating a fashion interest in business dress was solely a personal matter and did not see any consequences for a business image:

To me, it says that they've been out shopping recently or that it's important to them. I don't think that's bad, I don't think it's good either way. It's just part of them. Obviously fashion is more important to that person. I don't see that as a problem, but not necessarily a plus either. It's one of those neutral things. (13)

Balancing the forces of conservatism and fashion successfully allows a woman to avoid the danger of exhibitionism. Attending to fashion in the extreme in business can be seen as an attempt to draw attention to oneself. The participants felt that being "too trendy" or "too involved in fashion" could lead to a woman being perceived as an exhibitionist.

I think it [fashion] can mean you are doing very well. People can tell expensive clothes. It depends on whether you have an endless supply of cash to look as you want to look. ...And let other people know that you have. (1)

These are a little more flashy than what I would probably do. It depends...if you go to an office, that's still pretty dressy. I would be more conservative when dealing with people. Because when you go out to see someone, if you're overdressed, I think it can say something. You should want other people's attention to be on work, not on you. (4)

Trendiness could also indicate a lack of judgment in following fashion.

If you can get by with a trend and it looks good on you, then that's okay. If you are following a trend just because it's a trend, then to me, that's not fashion. It just makes you look stupid. (16)

Being perceived as easily swayed by fashion trends could also communicate negative ideas about business women:

You may think that they [fashion followers] are trendy because it's the thing to do. They conform easily, they want to fit in, rather than stand alone and be the person that they are. (11)

Exhibitionism causes others to question one's judgment and also one's motives in the business setting. Too much attention to personal aspects can distract oneself and others from the business at hand. Conservatism balanced with fashion in business dress can help eliminate attention to aspects of the personal realm and help focus on business only.

These are a little too flashy. Sometimes I think you have to dress conservative [sic], [because] you can't be noticed. If you're wearing something fancy, they're not listening to you, they're looking at you. ... If you want to do what you're set out to do, make a sale that's right, then you've got to keep yourself in the background. (4)

Conformity versus creativity

The second dimension of the ideal image ranges from conformity to creativity in dress. Conformity was defined as the adaptation of the individual to fit in and present oneself as similar to the others in a group. Creativity was the expression of one's personal characteristics and aesthetic play with dress. Conformity is a professional priority, necessary for career advancement. Creativity, in most professional fields, was a personal priority; most women valued the opportunity to foster their aesthetic inclinations through dress.

Many issues of career development for women are framed in gender terms. For these women, conformity often was viewed as the need to be seen as similar to men. In the most

traditionally male-dominated businesses like finance and insurance, men still outnumber women. Because of the gender imbalance in those industries and their conservative nature, the participants from those types of businesses found conforming to men a significant issue.

You knew, if you wanted to succeed, you were going to dress the part. You were going to look corporate. ... You don't want to look too feminine or sexy. You want to come across as having as much clout as your peer, who is a male. (3)

I think in business there is a professional [standard], "Well, I promote you because you look like me." Now, I don't have a penis and I don't wear a tie. So, it's real hard for women to get promoted in any event. But you will note, in business, if the man wears conservative ties, all the underlings are going to wear conservative ties. If the leader wears more contemporary ties--patterns and different flowery things that we're seeing now--all the underling men will wear that style of tie. We don't want to be looked upon as somewhat different. It means your ideas might be different than mine. Your values might be different than mine. Geez, you gotta be just like me, and then you remind me of me, and then I promote you. And, so you have that as a standard, that's just a given. (1)

As the preceding quotation illustrates, similarity and conformity among employees is necessary for maintenance of shared values and goals. The goals of the business must be held by all employees to maintain order and achieve the success of the company. An employee interested in advancement must foster the impression that he or she is trying to be a team player. As Kanter (1977) found, women, by wearing a different team uniform than men, may be suspected of having different values and ideas about the business.

It depends on the circumstances and the kind of company, but if you want promotions, and you're working in a very corporate, professional structure, and you don't appear that way, then they probably don't see a place for you in their future. (8)

In other instances, the importance of conformity was demonstrated in terms of group solidarity, without reference to gender. Similarity in appearance was described as a natural phenomenon which occurs. People want to look similar to those around them and not stand

out too much from their peers. Not only do these women construct for themselves an image based on others, they judge others according to their own ideas as well.

It's just a matter of what strikes me as professional and how I want to come across. I guess to a certain extent, I expect everybody to feel the same way I do, so when I see something that is against the grain to me, it seems like something that probably shouldn't be worn. (13)

I was probably pushing the code. I wanted the people who work for me to look like I thought they should look. (3)

In addition to conformity with peers, people want to look like those with authority above them.

[Q: Where do you think standards evolve from?] Peer pressure. I think if you work around people who are more dressed up then you feel that you want to be too. And if it's okay for people to wear jeans and sweatshirts, then that's how you conform. And I think you take a cue--like one of our managers--again they are not majorly [sic] dressed up, but they do swing in and out of the corporate world a little more than the rest of us. So I think we take our cue from them. [Q: So would you say it comes from management downward.] Probably. And a little bit across the line as well. (14)

The pressure towards conformity is quite often implicitly felt by employees, rather than explicitly mandated by the company. As one woman replied when asked how she knew what dress image to portray: "No one ever told you. You just knew." Apparently she knew by observing others around her.

The pressure toward conformity seemed to be driven more by the particular industry and the individual company's climate than by the activities one performs on the job. The level of authority, contact with the public, and types of job activities were seen as less important than the traditional image of the industry. For instance, a woman in a media position made the following comparison between her position and one in insurance:

I've got a good friend that works at an insurance company. She never ever works with the public as I do. And yet over there they always wear suits every day of the week. I've seen her in the skywalk with some of her co-workers at noon. They all are dressed to the hilt in coordinated suits and high heels and everything. And I've said some things to her and she said, 'That's how it is. We just know we have to.' She felt the pressure that she had to go purchase suits, corporate suits, which is very interesting when she doesn't ever meet the public. She's in a corner office all by herself, working on the computer all day. And yet she has this very corporate vice-president image. (16)

Conformity with a group implies the loss of individual identity. In some companies, this is necessary to communicate that the company and its goals supersede other interests. As Kanter (1977) found, extreme conformity allows employees to become interchangeable. It matters not who gets the job done, only that it get done. Participants recognized this as a characteristic of very large companies.

Same thing, same way. I suppose at some of those companies, same way same thing, is good. Maybe that's what you really want, to be sure that your product is always represented. (23)

When presented with this phenomenon for comment, a travel agent replied, "That sounds like IBM thinking." She went on to recognize some of the negative effects that a business stress on conformity can have for the employees:

It depends on who you want to work with, it depends on the kind of person you are. If you want to work for a cookie cutter kind of corporation, then that's fine. But if you want to work for somebody that gives you credit for being somewhat creative and having ideas of your own, then fashion [variety in dress] should be accepted. (2)

These comments illustrate that women find this level of conformity often stifling to their individuality. They recognized an inherent conflict between the extreme conformity expressed through appearance often demanded to function effectively and advance in a career, and the loss of one's individual identity which can result.

Interestingly, the women described the conflict between conformity and self-expression only for themselves. While they commented on the degree of conformity in appearance among men and men's lack of options in which to express creativity through dress, none seemed to believe that men feel any loss of self due to their limited range of appearance images. Men are perhaps not socialized to express the unique self through dress as are women.

Creativity, expressed through and emerging from the aesthetic nature of dress, was very important to most of these women. Participants were aware of the creative activity involved in mixing and matching clothing items and accessories. Opportunities for aesthetic play with dress include the varieties in color, pattern and texture of fabrics, style lines and silhouettes, and accessories. These women felt that creativity in dress was a positive indication of creative abilities in general, and of personality characteristics.

I think it's [dress] a good way for women, well for anybody, to show off their personality and to experiment a little bit with different styles. I think it's definitely a way that you can show off your creativity. And how you put things together or how you wear things. (13)

Two-thirds of the participants enjoyed the activities of mixing and matching apparel items and experimenting with aesthetic features of dress. Only eight women did not feel that creativity in dress was a significant priority for their lives. Those eight tended to be generally conservative and traditional in their images, claiming to be creative in other aspects of their lives.

The aesthetic realm of dress has traditionally been women's sphere of activity. During the 70s and early 80s, the aesthetic aspects of dress were temporarily subjugated by women's

conformity to the dress for success ethos. Women were aware of a stifling of creativity during this period. In the early influx of women into business this may have been necessary. But as the following quotations illustrate, women have reclaimed the aesthetic realm of dress with pleasure.

[Q: Why do you think that sort of uniformity isn't so common anymore?] As more women have risen up the ranks, or entered business, we've just gotten confident that we can do a few different things. And it doesn't have to be these rigid standards; we can adapt what fits and looks good to us and what we feel good about [dress] and can take a few more risks. I think that corporate sort of uniform for women served its purpose because when women were entering management levels in great numbers it simplified life for them. It told them, 'Wear this and you'll be respected.' This is one thing you won't have to worry about. Because if you have this look you'll be fine. It kind of freed them to concentrate on some other things as opposed to maybe what they will be wearing. And now I think we have been freed a little bit, because more [variety] is accepted. (17)

You know, when I started working, all the women in second level management positions wore oxford shirts, bows and pearls. I mean, that's all they wore everyday: different oxford shirts, different length pearls, but it was like a uniform that was so boring. And women [now] want more options, they don't want to look like they came from a cookie cutter mold. (3)

Just as extreme conformity has a dangerous consequence for women, creativity without limits is not a wise alternative either. Dressing without some attention to fitting in can lead to an employee being perceived as an eccentric or a maverick personality. Being rigidly individualistic might imply that a person is not able to work within the group to accomplish tasks. It might also be perceived as contempt for business standards. Eccentricity in dress, above all, may raise questions about one's credibility.

I know of a [business woman] in Des Moines, who I have never seen when she wasn't dressed very dramatically, very unusually. Sometimes it's distracting to me. (12)

Employees dressed in a manner perceived as somewhat eccentric would have set for themselves a barrier which they may or may not have a chance to overcome:

Depending on your profession, you have to conform. I mean life is about rules. We can only drive so fast. Depending on your industry once you are out of school, you do have to conform. If I go and see a brain surgeon and he's wearing a Hawaiian shirt and white pants, I'm going to wonder about him. He's gonna have to have hell of a lot of credentials for me to want him to do brain surgery. It depends on the job. If I go see a lawyer and he has on something--maybe that Hawaiian shirt--and he's going to represent my interests, he's going to have to have some hellish good credentials behind him. I mean his clothes are going to bother me--my perceptions. (10)

Conformity and individual creativity must be balanced in order to maintain the image of a professional person and may contribute to the maintenance of the sense of self required for mental health and self-respect. Dress communicates one's willingness to be part of a group as well as a desire to be understood as a unique individual.

Masculinity versus femininity/sexuality

The gender dimension was often difficult and confusing for participants to articulate. While masculine business characteristics were easily expressed, there was much disagreement among these women about the concept of femininity. A distinction was often drawn between presenting oneself as female versus being blatantly feminine in nature. There was general disagreement about the characteristics of femininity in business images. In addition, some women were particularly adamant that they did not think that sexiness was an extreme form of femininity. For these reasons, the female pole in the model is divided into two items: femininity and sexuality.

Masculinity in dress for women is described as dressing similarly to men. Masculine characteristics in dress include the basic suit silhouette, dark colored suits contrasted with

light shirts, and some ornamental detail at the neckline. In general, the more masculine details incorporated into women's business image, the more powerful or authoritative the image is perceived.

Well, in business, the general attire for men has always been the symbol of power. (1)

I would say I try for a softer version of a man's traditional business wardrobe. (11)

Occasionally I would be the only non-senior officer [in a meeting]. At that time, there were no female officers either. So yeah, I would [wear a suit]. I would not have wanted to stand out that much from the men. (3)

The symbols of masculine dress indicate a readiness and a capability to perform the job at hand. By adopting men's symbols, women communicate that they are on the job for business purposes and they are subordinating all other personal characteristics and needs (including femininity and sexuality) to business activities.

Well it's just--I think part of it is men wear suits and that's and it's kind of back to the knight and the armor. You put on your armor and you're ready for business, you put on your jacket and you are going to work. The jacket is the pivotal piece in the wardrobe for women. Men just standardly wear suits. It's no nonsense. There is no room for frills. You're not there for ornament. A business is driven to make money. And you are there to do a job. (10)

While women were aware of the wisdom of adopting men's symbols of power, they believed that women should not completely subjugate themselves in imitation of men. Looking too masculine can be perceived as a gender norm violation. Women must maintain an appropriate degree of femininity as well. Strict adherence to a menswear look might imply that a woman would rather not be female. This is looked upon very negatively.

I've always known the corporate whatever. But I think women should be feminine. I don't think they should just dress like a man with the corporate image all the time. (9)

I can tell you right now that employers prefer the little bit of style and femininity. And that doesn't come out in a navy blue suit up to here. I don't think that you need to go out on an interview looking like the pin-stripe person with the tie. I really dislike those and I think that's like being a clone of a man. (20)

Some of the participants felt that presenting themselves as feminine women was positive for their business image. The characteristics of feminine dress which were viewed as positive included soft, drapery fabrics, bright colors, and accessories such as gold jewelry, pearls, scarves, and small touches of lace. These types of details were uplifting to women and most thought that other men and women in a business setting appreciated seeing these touches of femininity.

A lot of my suits are unique and different. Like I say, I don't want to walk in looking like a peacock, there is a limit. But if it's very tailored, and formal and still bright colored, you can really get away with it, it looks very nice. And they [men] kind of appreciate the color because they wear only blues, browns and blacks. (8)

I'm not talking about the slit skirts and the sexiness. No that does not belong in the corporate world. But the femininity comes in with some softness, like a washed silk jacket or blouse. Women are doing the job and they are not on the job looking for men. But yet they are women and I think they feel free to be women. There is a difference between men and women. And that's well appreciated. (20)

A few of the women were reluctant to define femininity in terms of dress characteristics. Instead they felt that being perceived as feminine depended more on personality and physical characteristics than dress. For women holding this view, femininity was a very essential part of a woman. It might be characterized as a gracefulness or a secure sense of self for women. They believed that this type of femininity could not and should not be subdued in business.

I don't think it's the thing about ruffles and lace. It's the attitude and mannerism along with the dress. A person can be very feminine wearing a business suit. Maybe

it's more personal style, it's just kind of an impression left on you. I'm not so sure it's dictated by clothing as it is by personality of the individual. (8)

It says you're confident and that you like yourself and that you take care of yourself. And taking care of yourself is not dressing with that high slit skirt. It's being the very best that you can be. It really shows an employer that this is who I am and I am proud of it. And let me tell you, that's the kind of people they want. (20)

On the other hand, extreme femininity can be detrimental to a business image. Extremely feminine dress included printed floral fabrics, pastel colors, styles with lots of ruffles and lace and those with loose or flowing silhouettes. These details were perceived as "too feminine." Participants felt that being overly feminine could lead to women being perceived as frivolous.

I don't know what the person intends, but it [feminine dress] could say what the person wants to be treated like. She'd be perceived and treated that way. Maybe she's not aggressive and not assertive and wants to be respected for being like a china doll or something. (13)

I think, in business, to a man [feminine dress] may portray that a woman doesn't know as much or that she's not as well informed or not as powerful as he is. That's something I felt that men would think. (3)

As a positive or neutral factor in women's business images, sexuality in dress simply meant being female. None of the women commented on any incidence of women trying to present themselves as genderless persons. They suggested that they were proud of being women and that they would not want to try to be or act like men.

And I'm not trying to not be a woman. I wouldn't want to be anything else. (1)

I enjoy being a woman. I think you should have your own individuality. And quite frankly, I have never had a problem with that. (20)

However, blatant sexuality in the workplace was a strong theme for women. They felt that in every instance, one should be very cautious and avoid looking "sexy." The perception of

sexiness or sexual intent due to one's dress was a major *faux pas* in these participants' opinions. They disapproved of anyone intentionally presenting a sexy appearance and felt that a woman should be on guard about sexuality in this regard. Women thought looking sexy in business could cause many types of conflict for women and was never a smart approach. First of all, trying to look sexy might cause tension among women in a work group. The appearance of competition for sexual attention was considered inappropriate. In addition, women thought that sexual intent displayed through dress could incite sexual harassment of women. And finally, looking sexy causes others to question a woman's motives in the workplace.

It's almost that people assume something else about your life if you wear something like that to work. They might assume you were at work for a reason other than to be serious about your work. (15)

Sexiness was most frequently equated with body revealing or body conforming dress such as low cut necklines, short skirts and tight sweaters. Therefore, participants generally felt that looking sexy was something women could consciously avoid. They did not seem to consider the possibility that the perception of sexuality and sexy dress might vary among individual perceivers.

Attractiveness

In addition to the maintenance of a balance among the meaning components, women are expected to cultivate physical attractiveness in their business image. The role norm of attractiveness is pervasive in business. Kanter (1977) noted that even male executives in business tended to be physically attractive.

Participants often mentioned that attractiveness was an advantage for women. Only two women cited instances where physical beauty was a barrier for women in business. In one case, a beautiful woman was assumed to be less intelligent and in the other, a woman was suspected of achieving her career advancement based on appearance and sexuality factors instead of her performance in business.

Most of the participants agreed that women who are attractive have greater chances for career advancement.

I think there's a stress on being attractive, not necessarily pretty, just attractive. It helps if you're attractive going up the corporate ladder. You know what I'm saying...it's awkward to try to explain. As a rule, you don't see size 22 people advance. You don't see people that do nothing with their hair or don't wear any make-up--you don't see those kind of people at the top. If you look in the work force, those people are not going to be up there on the top of the totem pole in most cases. So being attractive, not attractive in the sexual sense, makes sense. (3)

Being perceived as attractive and dressed appropriately connoted positive characteristics about business persons. The converse was also true among these women. Attention to physical grooming was believed to communicate a measure of self-love and self-worth. Overweight or poor grooming habits were perceived as a lack of concern with self. This lack of conscientiousness about personal habits was believed to extend to a lack of conscientiousness about performing duties at work as well.

I think dress says what you are. If you're not neat or clean or careful, it tells a lot about you. It might mean you're not careful about your work either. One of the agents we had once was a real sloppy person. He borrowed my car one time and I didn't like the way he took care of it. I never let him borrow it again. This is the way he was with his work. He was sloppy, you couldn't depend on him. He didn't last. Another man we have now... he's very professional and he looks it. And he will move ahead. He's smart, he knows what to do. And when you compare the two people, you know why. (4)

Unfortunately, appearance can affect impressions of someone's job performance. An example that comes to mind is an overweight person. She may be considered slower or lazy or not disciplined. Otherwise, she wouldn't be overweight, right? That's the assumption. (8)

The perception that attractiveness is an advantage for success in the pursuit of career goals has been confirmed by research. Attractive people are consistently found to be rated higher on other desirable social attributes (e.g., Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Johnson and Roach-Higgins (1987) found that attractiveness positively affected ratings of personality of job interview candidates. In addition, an attractive woman may be perceived to be more knowledgeable, more competent and more effective in business than a less attractive woman.

Women generally believed that not only are women expected to be attractive in business, this phenomenon was applied only to women, not to men. While some admitted that attractive men are often more successful than less attractive men, more latitude is accepted for men. For instance, overweight was not seen as detrimental to men's careers whereas it was very hazardous for women's employment and advancement. A vice-president in a medium sized insurance company acknowledged that this is discriminatory, but also viewed it as somewhat justified by the nature of business:

You know, it's kind of this whole package that you are able to advance and I know that being attractive is a very big part of it. But if you are unacceptable from someone's standards--keep in mind it's the men making the decision--that will stop your career advancement or stall it at certain level. Remember I said we had this war going on between those what we call the 'fattys' and the 'skinnys?' In this organization [overweight] has truly caused a problem; the sales staff will not take the inside staff out to meet the clients. We will not put an overweight person in front of our clients because of their general appearance--yes, that's very discriminatory. But this is a business for a profit. And that is a business call made by the person in charge of bringing in income and paying all our salaries. It's a really hard thing to deal with. (8)

The same vice president also observed with a colleague that many of the women who have reached the top ranks in business have some things in common and that attractiveness is one of those characteristics. The participants generally accepted the work of maintaining personal attractiveness without complaint. They viewed it as just another part of women's culture which they embrace.

We were commenting about a fellow business woman. She was successful and very attractive. That seems to be a common thread. You will find in the ranks of the women who have moved up the corporate ladder, they are few but they have a lot in common. They've gotten there through advanced education and being extremely intelligent. Performance is by far the issue, but they also have some other factors in common, and one of them is that they are generally very attractive and well maintained. It may add some pressure to them, but they can also use it to their advantage. (8)

In addition to the overall imperative to look attractive, there is also an overall condition of formality which must be achieved in business appearances. The range between formality and casualness was often a theme for these women. However, it was not represented on the model because it is a condition which can be applied to any of the meaning components. For instance, there are casual and formal conservative clothes. There are also casual and formal fashionable styles. Therefore, formality level may need further examination in order to be incorporated into the model.

Mediating factors create a range of acceptability

As indicated in Figure 1, there is a range of acceptable images which are appropriate for women in business. One's appearance may not be positioned squarely between all meaning components, but may lean toward one or more as priorities. This positioning closer

to one set of meanings may occur because of the company culture and/or type of business a woman works for, her own personal priorities and her level of authority in her organization.

Figure 2 demonstrates possible positions which may demonstrate the ideal range for two hypothetical companies. Company A is a company with fairly rigid dress codes (although probably unwritten), a strong tradition of stability and conservatism, and an image of security. Company A is most likely a company whose business is some sort of financial operation, such as banking, investment brokering, or insurance. The image of their employees must communicate to the consumer or client the strength and security of their investment in the firm. Dress images in Company A would be very similar across employees, strongly demonstrating priorities of conservatism, conformity, and masculinity.

On the other hand, Company B is a more upbeat, fashion-oriented and creative company in its approach to business. Company B allows its employees much more freedom in defining themselves as individuals. In this company, employees' ideas are important to the advancement and promotion of the product. Company B must be perceived as a company keeping up or setting trends in the broader cultural milieu. Perhaps the products themselves are trendy items. Women are often more prominent in Company B than Company A, therefore there is less pressure on women to subordinate the feminine aspects of their appearance. Examples of Company B might include the media industry, retail sales, and public relations firms.

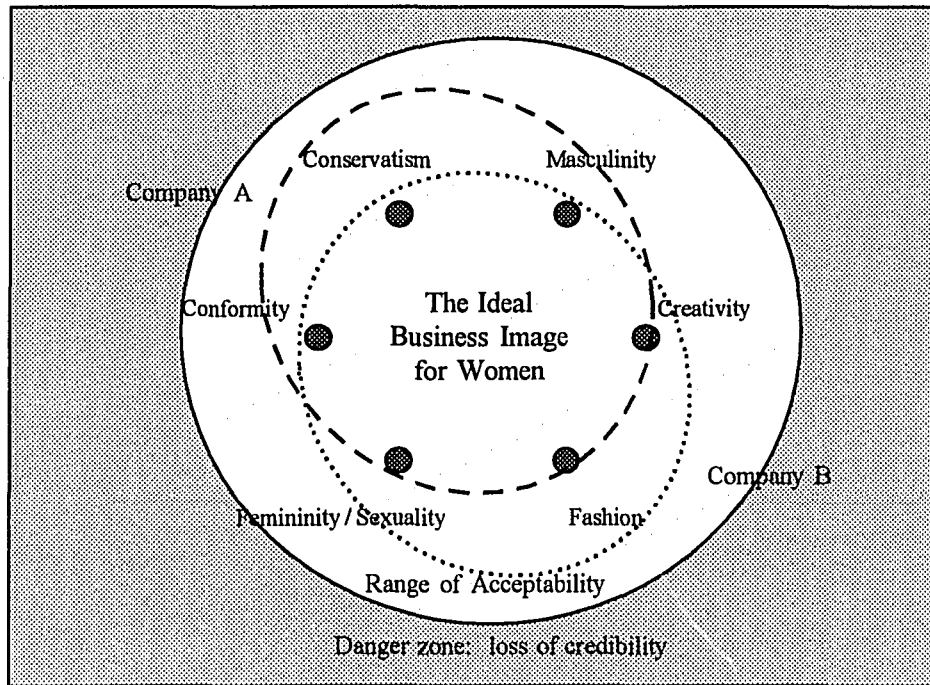


Figure 2. Priority emphases of two hypothetical companies.

In addition to company differences, the participants described themselves as having varying preference for each meaning component. For example, some women felt that conservatism was personally more important to them than fashion. For others, expressing femininity was important and they were less interested in adopting the masculine aspects of business dress.

Generally, women had to hold similar priorities to those required in their employment in order to be comfortable and happy with their image and their jobs. Role satisfaction probably requires embracement of role norms (Goffman, 1959). For instance, one participant who had left a financial firm for many reasons included in her explanation the fact that she did not like the type of conservative, traditional dress required in that firm. She was never very pleased with a rigidly conservative appearance, but she adapted while in that position because she believed that it was necessary for career success and advancement. On the contrary, other women in similarly conservative fields who seemed happy in their positions expressed personal priorities similar to those of their company. For instance, a woman in an insurance firm stated: "I think what I wear fits my personal taste. I like suits." (11) She felt no tension between her personal priorities and those of her job. This general trend of similarity between one's personal image priorities and the priorities of one's career position has been confirmed empirically. Ericksen and Sirgy (1989; 1992) have found that the greater a woman's motivation toward career success, the greater the congruence between her clothing preference and self-image.

Although women may feel little conflict in coordinating their personal and career image priorities, they may have trouble coordinating those priorities conceptually. Rucker,

Boynton-Arthur, and Williams (1993) found that women were most often troubled trying to select business dress which they felt effectively combined the variety of meanings required. Participants in the present study also occasionally mentioned this problem.

And finally, the range of acceptable images for women in business was influenced by the level in the organizational hierarchy which women occupied at work. Participants frequently commented that the higher the position on the corporate ladder, the more conservative and traditional a woman should look. These women often compared themselves with the clerical and support staff, saying that appearance was less important for the support staff than for those in middle management trying to work their way up.

On the other hand, a few women stated that the higher a woman rises, the more comfortable she may become in taking a few liberties with personal expression and creativity in her dress. They felt that women at the top were able to relax and "be themselves." This included the freedom to be more self-expressive and exhibit a certain style. This concept may have a great deal to do with higher self-confidence as well as more discretionary income for women in the executive ranks.

Origins of the Ideal Image

The participants recognized three social forces which influence the social construction of the ideal image for business women. The concepts women described were 1) the need for women to approximate men's business images and adopt their symbols of power; 2) the fashion industry's inherent need for continual change dictating appropriate fashions for women; and 3) women themselves driving change as consumers; through their consumption

patterns women construct their ideal images. Some women viewed one of the three forces as primarily responsible for the ideal, while others recognized the operation of two or all three of the forces.

Sixteen women felt that women's business images were created as the nearest imitation of men's images. The suit is a gendered symbol of the established traditions of men in business. This opinion reflects the dress-for-success ethic which began in the 1970s and 80s. And it suggests that women's success is dependent on the adoption of the traditionally male symbols of business, power and success.

Yeah, it's probably fitting more their [male establishment] model, what they're looking for, does that make sense? Appearance no matter what, is one factor that will make or break you going up the corporate ladder. Which is difficult enough, needless to say I didn't make it. I hit that glass ceiling real fast. (3)

That [women's adoption of men's images] can very likely be true because when women started working, they didn't rock the boat too much. Because when you look back in the early 1900's when women wore the little button sleeves and the stand up collar and I think they were very feminine. But when women went into business, they were dealing with men. And as I found even in mine, sometimes it was the good old boys. So you had to be able to stand your ground and prove yourself. (21)

Whereas some women described this adaptation to the existing image in gendered terms-- women conforming to the traditional *men's* business image, this view was not held by all the participants. The following demonstrates that the business image can also be viewed as somewhat gender neutral. For this woman, *business* was most salient term in business suit.:

[Q: In your opinion, are women adapting to a business image or a masculine image?] To a business image. I think it's become a more serious dress. I think when we started off that was dress for success or whatever. For awhile women started wearing the same dark blue or dark gray pin stripe suits, you see the little lapels, white shirts, even to the point where we wore little ties, you know that has modified quite a bit so that women can have more flexibility in what we wear. I think it started off with women conforming in. When men had an established place in the marketplace and

women were entering it, they looked at 'how can I fit in?' I think that since we've become much more comfortable with our place in the marketplace that we felt freer to deviate. (15)

The participants also recognized the influence of fashion on women as part of women's traditional sphere and felt that the shifts away from the dress for success ethic were due to the influence of the fashion industry. Ten women made some comment regarding the influence of fashion magazines, designers or retailers on trends in business images.

I don't know if it's more women in general working and realizing you don't have to be confined to the blue suit type of thing. Maybe somewhat men, you see suspenders coming in and a little more wild ties, and different dress codes relaxing. Probably retailer pressure, too, in terms of what's out there and what people are selling. (23)

The participants recognized the advances women have made in the business world, both in numbers of women in business positions and women advancing to positions of authority along the corporate ladder. They felt that women have "come into their own" to some degree, having proven themselves capable of doing their jobs, managing people and running companies. This success has provided women a self-confidence that is reflected in their return to more feminine and relaxed styles. They viewed women's dress options and the current range of acceptable styles as an opportunity for women to define themselves.

I think women have found that they can make it in the market place and once they do,...they had to be risk takers to start [in business]. Once they did that and found they could succeed in the market and the job, then I think they took the next step which allowed them to make their own statement. (17)

There's a little more self confidence there. Maybe self confidence itself has something to do with it. Once you know you're in the position and you know that you can do the job or you've met the challenge or that idea that women shouldn't be working or whatever. (23)

I think it was more women trying fit in with men [several years ago]. Whereas, now that's not so much the issue, it's just doing a good job. At least that's my perception of it. (11)

Because these three views on the origins of the ideal business image were expressed, and none was held exclusively by all the participants, no one theoretical perspective can be exclusively supported. Most women recognized that three forces cooperate in the construction of women's ideal images, thus any explanation of the origins of women's ideal images must include a synthesis of the three concepts.

Each of the three perspectives is consistent with one of the feminist critiques of fashion discussed earlier. Much of feminist theory is based on the premise that science and culture impose an artificial dialectic on male and female definitions. Feminism claims that the social science approach includes the framing of women's experience in opposition to men's, viewing the male condition as normative and the female as deviant from the male standard (Smith, 1987). This stream of feminist thought would be supported by the fact that most of the women felt that the ideal women's image is patterned at least in part, after men's business images.

The second social force responsible for shaping women's ideal business images was assumed to be the fashion industry. This view would be consistent with the feminist views which suggest that women are influenced by a culture created by the fashion and beauty industries and structured through the fashion press and women's magazines (e.g., Faludi, 1991; Wolf, 1991).

Although the dominant force, according to these findings, is the adaptation to the existing male pattern, almost half the participants felt that women were participating in self-

definition of the ideal. Postmodern feminist theory assumes that women are not just sponges absorbing a culture imposed upon them, but rather are active participants in the social world. As agents of social action, women are responsible for the creation of their own cultural and social norms and ideals (Kaiser, 1991). Of course, within this study, women had differing perspectives on whether the current situation in women's business dress was one of increasing variety or a status quo. This demonstrates that the concept of variety is relative. However, the view that women are experiencing more freedom in dress seems to be the one to which women are moving. Many who cited women in the creation of their own ideals suggest that this is a more recent move on women's part.

Implications for theory

Role Theory: This study does not find support for Warren's (1949) role theory. According to the theory, during periods of major change in social institutions, social roles and the symbols of those roles will be confused. As women moved into the workforce in large numbers, the institutions of business and commerce were dramatically altered. If Warren's theory is applicable, the dress symbols used for those roles would be highly varied at the beginning of the change and become more similar and uniform among persons as the institutions "settle in" to new patterns. In this case, women's business dress would be widely varied as women entered the workplace, and would become more uniform over time.

The participants in this study seem to support exactly the opposite propositions. These women believe that the period of rapid social change is past and that women's roles in business are now quite well established. Many of the older women who have had 20+ years of

experience in business claimed that the changes over time in women's business dress have been toward more variety of acceptable images, not more uniformity. They felt that as women entered the workforce in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this was the period of most change and confusion about women's roles. During this time, women's dress was more uniform with more clearly defined dress codes. Many of them stated that they wore the "dress for success" suit earlier in their careers, but had moved on to other styles since. As women have settled in and become more comfortable with their roles in business, they have gained the confidence to define a wide variety of role dress for themselves. Thus, Warren's (1949) theory is not supported by these findings.

Symbolic Self-Completion Theory: Earlier, three propositions were derived from Solomon's (1983) perspective on symbolic self-completion theory. The first proposition was that women's dependence on clothing to symbolize their work roles would depend on age and/or experience--younger women with less business experience might adhere to a more limited and conservative range of business dress styles, adopting the traditional suit while older women with more business experience might exhibit more freedom in dress style choices. This proposition is partially supported by the attitudes of these participants. While younger women did frequently describe themselves as conservative in dress, and many of them claimed to wear basic suits, they did not wear only the traditional standard. They incorporated into their images a great deal of variety in styles and colors, while using the basic tailored suit silhouette as the foundation of their look. The younger women may have claimed to be more conservative and less adventurous than some of the older women, but they were not wearing the strict version of the business suit which many of the older women had earlier

in their careers. These differences may be due to differences in the range of acceptable images for women early in their careers; there was a smaller range of styles for women starting in business in the 70s and early 80s than for women beginning in the 1990s. Therefore, while the first proposition might be supported, further study is needed to control for the *zeitgeist*, or “spirit of the times” during which women come of age and begin a career. An assessment of conservatism is relative to the times.

In addition, these differences might be due to generational differences. According to generational theory, there is a certain shared character or mindset among age cohorts which is formed through similar life experiences and shared culture during the formative years (Strauss & Howe, 1991). The older women belong to the “baby boomer” group which are noted to be more individualistic, independent and revolutionary. The younger women are part of the “baby busters” group which may be more conformist, due to concern with tighter economic realities. Coming of age in a “multi-media” culture, they may also be more literate in visual images and symbolic meanings.

Other studies have found mixed, or limited support for symbolic self-completion theory in various contexts. While Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) found support for the first proposition among male MBA students, Solomon and Douglas (1987) did not find support for the theory among businesswomen. In fact, they found the opposite of proposition one, the age/experience hypothesis, to be true among their sample. In addition to gender influences, contextual factors may complicate the application of the theory. Casselman-Dickson and Damhorst (1993) tested the application of symbolic self-completion theory using a sample of female cyclists. They also found no evidence supporting the theory that experience in a role

inversely affects attachment to role symbols, while other studies using male athletes have found support for the theory. Although the present findings might initially appear to support the theory, they may include confounding variables. Therefore, I would advise caution in accepting the theory.

From Solomon's second proposition, I suggested that women moving into previously male-dominated careers would rely more on clothing to symbolize their roles. They would be very concerned about adopting the appropriate role symbols, and perhaps more cognizant of clothing choices as symbolic actions. This proposition was found to apply in this case. Most participants in male-dominated fields did seem to be more cognizant of appearance issues, particularly as they may be involved in negotiating gender differences between men and women. They were aware that communication styles and symbol vocabularies differ between men and women.

The third proposition suggested that when moving from one role to another, women might initially be more concerned about using clothing cues to communicate their new roles than when they later become more comfortable and confident in those roles. This proposition was not supported. Several questions attempted to probe this idea, including questions about whether there were ever times in their careers when the participants were uncertain about or wished for more specificity in dress codes. Participants did not affirm any additional concern or uncertainty about dress due to career moves either between fields or upward through organizational hierarchies.

Aesthetics and women's experience: Aesthetic involvement in dress is a traditionally female activity. Outside of business role dress, fashion has always been an important

component of women's experiences. As the participants believe that women have reclaimed self-definition in the process of loosening the codes for women's business dress, they have also returned to the aesthetic realm. Creativity and fashion are priorities of the aesthetic realm.

Women agreed that there is broad range of choices for women's business dress, and because women's choices are more varied than men's, the choices themselves carry more communicative powers. In other words, the image a woman constructs for herself carries more significance than a man's because she has a broader vocabulary from which to make statements. In this manner, women's appearances are more heavily laden with information. In contrast, the traditional business suit has become redundant (Back, 1985). Its information is standardized and generalized. Because of the lack of redundancy in women's more varied aesthetic expressions through dress, there is a greater risk of miscommunication inherent in women's business images. Although the participants were aware of the increased risk and importance of women's appearance due to the range of women's choices for business dress, it was a risk they were willing to accept in return for the greater aesthetic satisfaction.

Women are judged more on their appearance. I don't think that's fair. But yet it really doesn't bother me that much. You grow up as a woman learning to deal with the difference between men and women and just accept that. You find your own position and your comfort zone within those issues. We have a lot more variety to choose from [in dress]. We're not just stuck with suits and ties. We have a lot more room to experiment and be flexible and where that can be a hindrance, it can also be a lot more fun. (13)

Participants felt that the shift back towards more creative and fashion oriented dress for women's business images was due not only to women asserting themselves, but also valuing themselves and their culture for what it is. Women's culture includes the more aesthetic

aspects of many facets of daily life. As Kaiser, Freeman, and Chandler (1993) noted, female discourse portrays a unity between aesthetic and social dimensions of social processes. The aesthetic nature of appearances are for women a productive outlet. The women in this study certainly recognized and valued the aesthetic nature of their dress for creative and individual self-expressive purposes. In a sense, the multiple meaning components of the model facilitate the creative exploration of self-expression within flexible and vague boundaries.

The Importance of Business Images to Corporate Culture: The Case of Casual Day

Dress is a social process which contributes to group cohesion and group identity. It has been demonstrated that dress in the business setting contributes to employees being viewed as competent, credible professionals in their own view, in the eyes of their colleagues, and by clients and persons outside a particular business organization. While the standards of business dress can foster equality, similarity, and comraderie among employees, the case can best be illustrated by the temporary altering of business dress standards--"casual day."

Casual day is a recent popular phenomenon during which businesses designate one day per week or month to suspend the dress codes (written and unwritten) and encourage employees to wear more casual clothing such as sportswear. Casual day is becoming a widespread practice among businesses of all types and sizes.

You know, they said this is a casual day. Wear whatever you want. A lot of companies seem to be doing that every now and then. (19)

Although the rules of business formality are suspended for casual days, rules still apply--a *new* set of rules. Casual day requires conformity to a new standard, one which in many cases has yet to be clearly delineated. Some employees are not completely comfortable

with negotiating these new standards, particularly men. The women in this study were generally comfortable with the concept of casual day, but in their opinions, the men they worked with often weren't.

On the last [meeting] agenda I put out, I said wear casual business attire. I almost just said casual, but I didn't want people to come dressed in jeans. But I also didn't need the tie or the hose for women. I got a couple of phone calls from men saying 'what the heck is casual business attire?' I didn't hear from any of the women. Men seem to be having a terrible time negotiating what to do on a casual day. Some of them just wear the dress slacks and the shirt, and leave off the tie. They walk around and you can tell they are completely uncomfortable. (23)

Women are comfortable with the shift in the rules of dress on casual day because they are familiar with the processes of constructing themselves for various contexts. Therefore, women are more attuned to clothing's capabilities to send messages and influence interactions. Men are aware of their clothing as an indicator of past accomplishments associated with clothing (Kaiser, Freeman, & Chandler, 1993). Due to this difference in attention, women are more comfortable than men when operating without clear limits for dress.

Business dress, by emphasizing conformity and similarity among group members, can reflect and create a variety of organizational dynamics. Dress contributes to the legitimization of employees and the image of the organization (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993) as well as group cohesion. Casual day is a very specific illustration of the spirit or cohesion of the group.

I keep thinking, "Wouldn't it be nice to have an Iowa State sweatshirt day?" maybe when Iowa State's playing or something. It seems to be a way to build staff morale now. Once in a while, we have a casual day on a Friday. Then if everyone does it, it's more acceptable than if just you are at work in a sweatshirt and everyone else has suits on. You would feel very uncomfortable. ... When we have had casual days and for some reason I had an appointment that day and dressed up... then either I'm uncomfortable or I have made other staff uncomfortable. They say "Well, are you really going to dress casual tomorrow, or are you just saying that you are?" Comments like that make you realize that it bothers them that they took the risk of

coming in casual and you didn't. [Q: It's interesting that you use the term risk-- Why?] I think it's that perception about skill and ability and credibility. Those are not there if you're wearing jeans. (23)

The participants in this study recognized an inherent risk in lowering the standards of business dress for casual day. The risk is that one will be seen as less professional, less businesslike, etc. This risk is allegedly neutralized by the fact that everyone in a group supposedly participates in casual day. Therefore, casual day was often a source of stress among group members when someone elected not to participate for some reason.

There's one person in our office who will still dress up in a very nice dress or suit even on casual day. She is trying to portray the image of professionalism, she doesn't believe in the casual wear thing. I think she likes the image of being up above. It separates her from other people. It's almost like she's too good to dress down like everyone else. (18)

On the other hand, casual day and the group process is often considered subordinate to normal business activities. Employees often expect that casual day is or should be suspended when there is something special going on in the office. This is generally a source of confusion; employees are uncertain if they should observe casual day or dress for business as usual.

Once a month, we have a casual day. I never really pay much attention to it, because usually, we have something going on. For example, this last Friday, a colleague and I were presenting a new program idea to our CEO. He came dressed in just a sweater, clearly he was observing casual day. It didn't occur to us to dress casually at all. I don't care that it's casual day, I'm presenting an important idea. And actually, his dressing that way made me uncomfortable. But you see, he's above us, so that must go without saying. (16)

Casual day can disrupt the flow of established relationships in the business office if it is not uniformly adopted. By calling attention to the negotiation of standards for casual day, the group processes of conformity and cohesion involved in formal business dress are illustrated in

contrast. This illustration demonstrates the same effect for formal business dress; uniform acceptance facilitates relationships among co-workers and fosters "esprit de corps" (Joseph & Alex, 1972).

Maternity Issues

Nine of the participants had been in the workforce during at least one pregnancy. Two of these were pregnant at the time of our conversation. All of these women commented on the difficulties they had finding maternity clothing which they felt was appropriate for work and which fit their tastes and budget.

Several mentioned that good maternity suits or dresses in styles and quality materials such as they would normally wear were simply too costly for the amount of use they would get out of them. However, one woman in the insurance industry went to extreme cost in order to maintain her image. She worked in an all male environment and it was vital to her that she not endanger the image she had worked hard to maintain. So she had suits specially made to fit her during the later stages of her pregnancy. As it turned out, her efforts went for naught; she was a single mother and her pregnancy seemed for her the beginning of a series of harassment incidents for which she eventually sued her employers. Before the pregnancy, she was a single, older career woman, devoted to her job, just like "one of the boys." But after the pregnancy, she was a target.

In terms of being a woman, it's kind of a shifting, kind of a different deal. As long as I could do that [the work] and I was single, I didn't perceive a lot of problems. I became pregnant, [then] all of a sudden, I became a threat. Because now I was changing. I became an easy target. My problems began when I got pregnant, for the most part. I was always paid less, but I wasn't in the forefront, I didn't understand it at the time. But I began changing, and now I had my boss say to me, "I always thought of you as a daughter." This

was at the end of that period of time. But, I think it's more comfortable to them [men at work] when they can relate you to something. (1)

During her lawsuit, the defense testified that she looked "like a bag lady". They implied that she had let down her professional image. Even though she had gone to extreme care and expense to maintain a professional wardrobe, she believes that the men at work suddenly saw her differently--less professionally--after she became pregnant.

Some of the other mothers also described an awareness of a feeling of vulnerability in regard to their professional image during maternity. This vulnerability led to varying degrees of discomfort for the women, depending on how confident they were in their positions. The following statement was made by a young woman who has been in her first career position for three years. While happy to be pregnant, she's depending on the others to understand the difference in her current image:

I try to be pretty professional. Maternity clothes are real difficult to do that on a physical level. Which is awkward for me. All along in this pregnancy I've felt kind of strange, because normally I would feel very out of place just wearing a jumper and a turtle neck. If I wasn't pregnant, I almost always wore a suit. In fact, it's been kind of a nice change of pace, because most people expect that. You feel comfortable going into a situation like that knowing that people understand that you're not wearing your normal clothes and it's temporary, you're probably wearing them for six months or so. It's been kind of nice. (13)

Another woman was less uncomfortable about her maternity image because she had had a few more years to establish her professional image credibility:

I think there's some general acceptance of pregnant women that comes just because people are kind of in awe. They just, they knew how you dressed before. I was never uncomfortable. [Q: You say they knew how you dressed before, so that implies that they're sort of forgiving you for what's going on in the middle here?] I guess I never thought of it, I didn't mean it quite that way, as much as I think I had established a professional feel through my dress before that. Now, if you were just starting a job being pregnant, I may have invested more in a jacket or two. Just for my own way of

making sure that I'm at a comfort level feeling out new surroundings and a lot of interacting, but not in this case. (23)

Pregnancy emphasizes the sex differences between men and women. When a woman is pregnant, she just cannot dress to imitate men and pull it off. And frequently, maternity clothing does not attempt to imitate menswear styling and details. Several of the women found pregnancy an opportunity to celebrate being female through their dress. They saw the change from professional suits as a chance to play a bit with styles and colors which they would not normally wear. The following statements are from two women who are rapidly climbing the ranks of management in their particular fields. They were both normally very conservative in their image, borrowing heavily from the traditional dress for success look.

Up until that time I had been dressing very conservatively. Namely white blouses and dark suits. I may have had one silk/linen blazer that I wore but mainly I dressed very conservatively. And then [during pregnancy] I went to the Laura Ashley thing, I went very long, romantic type look and I had longer hair then and it was curly. A big bow in my hair. So I didn't conform to anything at that time. I just kind of felt kind of motherly so I did it. (17)

I had some maternity clothes made and fortunately at that time I was just beginning to recognize that there had to be some maternity wardrobe for working women. And so there were some things that were fairly serious, but I also had some clothes made that probably brought out the feminine side of me more than almost anything I've ever worn at work. I mean I had some hot pink colored dresses with like a teal trim that had kind of, not a lacy, but a gathered or a ruffle color with puffy sleeves. [Q: You sound surprised at yourself that you did that?] It was like I was obviously a woman because I was pregnant so I might as well flaunt it. That was fine. I had some fun with it. [Q: The fact that you were pregnant emphasized that you were a woman. Did that ever make you uncomfortable?] No, I don't think it did. You just decide that it's a fact of life. People better get used to it. (15)

The practical, confident attitude about others' acceptance of pregnant women in the workforce was mirrored by others as well. As women increase in numbers in all types of fields, particularly in their twenties and thirties, seeing pregnant women at work is becoming

more common. An up-and-coming business manager had a very positive experience with pregnancy and has a positive outlook for women in the future:

We have a very young, youthful employee base here and in the last 3 or 4 years, there are pregnant people all over the place. Especially pregnant women in the professional ranks. So, appearance-wise, I think there were so many of us, women at my level and a little older that were pregnant, that folks really became fairly used to it as a whole. I never felt uncomfortable at all that, appearance-wise, that I was pregnant. One of the things that's kind of been terrific about it... There's been change and I think it was noticed [by senior management]. I remember looking around in, I was in a board meeting one day, and I had one of the senior officers looking at me and he said, "Times are a changing." He said "It's not very often that we have had in this board room a pregnant professional woman standing up here and giving a presentation." For me, it's a situation that times are changing, women are coming into our own, we're much more prevalent, and with us is pregnancy and all that brings. For me, this is going to sound strange, this is one of the only things that we can do that a man can't do. Thank you very much, I am different than you are. (24)

Sexual Harassment Issues

The majority of the participants held stereotypes about clothing and dress indicating that women "should be careful not to send the wrong message". However, the degree to which clothing is believed to be a factor in sexual harassment seems to vary among the participants. Two women had pressed charges of sexual harassment and discrimination against former employers. They both asserted that dress had nothing to do with their experiences. Those with past experience of harassment asserted that it is a conflict of personal power between men and women, not of sexuality and appearance. Only two other women in the sample made similar statements.

On the other hand, 18 of the participants commented that the recent increased awareness of sexual harassment among the general public has or should result in women being more aware of and more conservative in their dress.

I think they [women] try very hard not to present that type of an image so no one can say 'look what she wears.' I think they are very careful. (20)

Particularly, many of these comments about awareness of one's dress referred specifically to maintaining modesty or avoiding provocative dress. Fifteen participants stated that dress can communicate messages of interest in or assertion of sexuality. They held women responsible for those messages and believed that poor judgment in dress decisions can cause problems at work. Several women even reported--quite disapprovingly--that they think some women consciously use their dress and sexuality to play aggressive sexual politics at work. Interestingly, 10 of the 15 who felt women were responsible for clothing messages also made comments that indicated their awareness of the non-denotative, inaccurate nature of dress messages. They were aware that the message a person might interpret may not be intended. Four additional women made observations about the inaccuracy of dress messages as well, but did not make statements about women's responsibility.

Only five participants stated that they felt employers should bear some responsibility in harassment situations. They indicated that through the enforcement of dress codes and through sensitivity training, employers could hope to influence employees and reduce conflicts.

On the question of admissibility of dress in court proceedings, 15 participants (62.5%) believed that dress could be allowed as evidence in court. They seemed to hold women responsible for the symbolic implications of dress, even realizing that dress could be misread.

Well, I think if we talk about dressing as sending messages like we have been, then we need to recognize that certain dress can also send [inappropriate] messages. In the court of law, then we're talking about what might precipitate an attack or what could precipitate harassment. I guess I do think that it's okay to talk about verbal and

nonverbal messages because it just recognizes that they are there. I don't think that we can say that dress is nonverbal message in one sense and disregard it that it can be a nonverbal message in another sense so I would say that yes it could. I don't believe that it offers an excuse for somebody to take liberties that they've been invited to. But I'm saying that the message may be there. (15)

Women who believed that dress could be a factor in sexual harassment felt that one's manner of dressing and self-presentation can indicate what type of attention is sought from others. Because dress can be interpreted as an attempt to draw attention to one's sexuality, they believed the jury should weigh the alleged victim's intent as well.

I think it [dress] could be admissible as evidence but I would hate to see that being the deciding factor. I think you have to look at a lot of different factors because the welcomeness is what's so difficult. (22)

Most of the women who would admit dress as a factor still maintained that while a woman's dress might confuse a situation, the harassment behavior of others is not excused by mixed dress messages.

I don't think it [inappropriate dress] makes it right that they're sexually harassed, but I also think they need to think about that if it is a problem. They maybe need to look at how they're dressing. ... I would allow it [dress as evidence], I don't know how much weight I would give it. It would be a consideration. It's there, but it's not an invitation for someone to, I don't mean to say they're asking for it. If that's the image they've chosen to portray, that's their choice, but it doesn't give someone the right to sexually harass them either. (23)

I do think that dress sets a little bit of a stage. If you are dressing unprofessionally or provocatively, that does probably open the doors for some opportunity maybe to ask for a date or crack a joke just to see what the reaction might be. Does it mean that you deserve to be bombarded by unwelcome advances? No, it doesn't. I mean this gets more into the personal side and if you said no, I don't care you were dressed, but should it be admissible in court? It probably counts in there somewhere. Should it be what your decision is based on? No. Could it help explain why you were approached the first time? Yes, it could. How you handled that approach doesn't have anything to do with dress. (9)

Nine women felt that dress should not be considered evidence in harassment suits. They regarded the supposition that women's dress can serve as an invitation as unacceptable. They believed that harassment behavior cannot be excused by dress messages and that harassment is not the victim's fault. They maintain that individuals are responsible for their own behavior and that women cannot cause men to behave in a certain manner.

Isn't that outrageous [victim stereotypes], isn't that absolutely outrageous, because that operates under the assumption, which I find insulting and I don't understand why more men themselves don't find it insulting, somehow they have no..., there's some line across which they [men] have no control....'You ask for it and you know, my, what do you expect me to do?' Well, I expect you to have control over your behavior and your language and everything else. The victim-asked-for-it stereotype, I find that offensive for women and for men. It's dismaying to me that more men do not find that stereotype insulting to them, to their gender. 'The dumb guys, the guys standing around drooling...' I would find that an insult for the men that I know. [Q: Do you think the issue of sexual harassment that dress is an important component?] No, that has to do with the perpetrator and not with the victim. As far as I'm concerned. (16)

However, even those who felt that dress should not be considered as a defense did not always make their case strongly or completely discount women's need for common sense and caution in dress:

We should be able to wear whatever we want to wear and do whatever we want to do, but those aren't the facts of life. There are men who take dress as an invitation to at least make comments, and there probably always will be those types. I've got mixed feelings. I don't think it should [be admissible]. (2)

The ages of the participants may partially explain their responses to the question of admissibility. The participants ranged in age from 24 to 71 years. The six women under 35 all believed dress should be admissible as evidence in harassment cases, as did the three women over 55. The women in the 35-55 age group were nearly equally divided between yes and no (6 to 9). Women under 35 began their careers after the concepts of "dress for success"

gained popular acceptance. The image consultants and career advisors during and after this movement emphasized the importance of personal appearance to career success. Having come of age in this climate and having possibly been influenced by the advice for women's dress, women in the younger age group now seem to hold very strong opinions about the importance of and messages communicated by dress.

The opinions of women in the oldest age group may be explained by the fact that these three women did not enter the work force until their late thirties or forties. They began working as mature women for whom the expression of sexuality may not have been as dominant an issue. In addition, they also may have accepted many notions about men's behavior-"boys will be boys"-which might cause them to feel more resigned to such problems. They felt women should adopt a conservative approach; women should just be careful not to provoke an incident by avoiding "sexy" dress. The 71-year old woman stated it this way:

I think they're both at fault, I think he shouldn't comment, and she should just dress a little more appropriate, in the work place. ... Just because it's out now, doesn't mean it didn't happen earlier. We just passed it off. But now since it's in front, on the front burner, you hear more about it. I think there was sexual harassment going on from time on. (4)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study explored women's experiences of appearance management in the business context. The importance of dress to women's career advancement, and the meanings of business dress were focused upon in order to contribute to women's use of dress as a means of achieving career success. The theoretical understanding of dress was expanded through the proposition of a grounded theory model of the meaning components involved in the construction of women's ideal business images. Kaiser, Nagasawa and Hutton (1991) refer to appearance management as "an active process of identity expression" (p. 171). While this active process is complex, this model demonstrates the multiplicity of meanings which can be conveyed through dress simultaneously. This study interpreted dress messages in the business context and found that appearances are considered vitally important for women. Special cases of maternity and "casual days" at work illustrated the importance of the business image for women. Finally, the relationships perceived between dress and sexual harassment were explored.

A review of literature presented a number of topics and research areas which were drawn upon to direct the interview development and guide the analysis. Perspectives on appearance are complex and interrelated, but several general areas were reviewed. In studies of women's worklife, maintenance of a professional business image has been found to be a concern for women. But most studies focusing on business dress have used women as stimulus characters to measure attribution of traits; they have not explored women's own perspectives or experiences of dress. An examination of the past three decades of women's

image advice found recent changes in dress prescriptions, suggesting that women may face uncertainty regarding current appearance norms. Reasons for the recent changes in women's dress images were postulated using various theoretical propositions, including Warren's (1949) role change theory, Solomon's (1983) perspective on symbolic self-completion theory and various feminist perspectives on women's experience. In addition, the value of the aesthetic nature of dress was suggested to be an element of everyday experience through which women may receive personal gratification.

The nature and definitions of sexual harassment were explored. This study considered sexual harassment according to the Civil Rights Act, Title VII. Appearance stereotypes concerning provocative dress are consistently found to influence perception of victim responsibility for harassment in empirical studies. These stereotypes involve the use of dress, cosmetics and personal demeanor. Research finds that in general, the more attractive and "sexy" a woman appears, the more responsibility for harassment is assumed. Research also finds that the attribution of sexual intent to subjects varies by gender of respondent. It was postulated that because dress is believed to influence attribution of victim responsibility, women may feel increased concern with appearance management in order to protect themselves from harassment and avoid attracting attention to their sexuality at work.

Long interviews were conducted with twenty-four women in various business positions in a Midwest urban area. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods. The participants varied in their ages and levels of career advancement. The interviews explored participants' background and current work situations and roles, their perceived ideal image and perception of changes in that image, their personal interest in

appearance, the perceived influence of dress on work interactions, and sexuality issues at work. Data were analyzed through interpretive and grounded theory approaches.

Findings of this study include general career concerns and attitudes about women's current status in the business world, a conceptual model of women's image meaning components which must be balanced to achieve the "ideal image," the importance of appearance for women at work during maternity and on "casual day," and women's views on the relationships between sexuality, harassment, and dress.

Grounded Theory Model of the Ideal Image for Business Women

Women in this study were concerned with constructing their appearances in accordance with the appropriate business image. Past research has found that criteria for appropriate business attire are not clearly defined. This study also found no dress style specifications delineating the ideal image. Instead, concepts were identified which contribute to an ideal business image. These underlying concepts were organized into a conceptual model of the meaning components women find necessary to communicate through their image in order to approach what they perceive as the "ideal."

Six concepts were identified as meaning components contributing to women's ideal business image: Conservatism, Fashion, Masculinity, Femininity/Sexuality, Creativity, and Conformity. These concepts are represented as three pair of polar axes which exert pull on the individual. They are conceptualized as polar pairs although in actuality, they may not be true opposites. The attraction of each of the components is not necessarily equal, and therefore they need to be balanced through conscious and careful attention by business

women. Kaiser, Nagasawa and Hutton (1991) suggested that ambiguity created by the opposition of forces in the creation of dress codes allows for expression of self through choice of meanings. For women in business, this ambiguity allows some flexibility, but not total freedom of choice. The women in this study did not choose to demonstrate one meaning as a priority in their dress at the sake of other meaning components; all meanings must be present to some degree in the business image.

For each meaning component, there is an extreme which must be avoided. Exhibiting too much of an individual meaning may endanger the image and destroy the individual's perceived credibility. The extremes included being perceived as passé or out of date, as an exhibitionist, as a violator of gender norms, as frivolous, or too sexy, as eccentric, or as lacking an individual identity. Maintaining balance between these priorities keeps a woman out of the danger zone associated with each polar extreme.

The balance of meanings required to maintain the ideal image is mediated by the particular field in which a woman is employed, by the position or level of authority she holds, and her personal tastes and attitudes. The potential for misalignment between personal appearance management priorities and those required in women's careers may cause tension and create a source of dissatisfaction with aspects of the career or personal image. Most participants reported that their career priorities were similar to their personal priorities about dress and appearance; however, there were a few women who seemed to feel a conflict between personal feelings about dress and their job requirements for dress.

An overall attention to matters of personal attractiveness was also a requirement of the ideal image. Attractiveness was viewed as a positive advantage to career advancement.

These opinions are consistent with research on attractiveness which finds that attractive people are assumed to possess more desirable traits than unattractive people. Participants recognized discrimination in their work experiences on the basis of personal attractiveness of employees. Overweight and less attractive women were perceived to have more limited career viability than attractive women. Participants felt that appearance disadvantages were of greater consequence for women than for men.

The ideal image was believed to originate through three social forces: 1) the need for women to approximate men's business images and adopt their symbols of power; 2) the fashion industry's inherent need for continual change that dictates appropriate fashions for women; and 3) women themselves drive change as consumers; through their consumption patterns women construct their ideal images. The women in this study felt that women's business images were formerly determined in relation to men's images and that the emphasis has recently shifted towards more autonomy among women defining themselves. They believed that women are achieving prominence in business and with that achievement comes the self-confidence to make their own choices and take appearance risks if they so choose.

Special Cases for Women's Business Appearances: Maternity and Casual Days

The importance of appearance norms for women in business was illustrated by two instances when the standard image was suspended. The instances described by participants and discussed here were maternity and during "casual day" at the office.

During maternity, a woman's body will not conform to the standard uniform of skirted suit. A pregnant woman's body shape simply makes different styles a necessity for a period of

time. This change in image accentuates a woman's female sexuality. The importance of appearance norms was highlighted by the fact that some women in this study found maternity a time of vulnerability due to the perceived lowering of professional image standards. Being perceived as a pregnant female above all else was felt as a risk to a woman's professional image. However, some participants found maternity to be an occasion to celebrate being a woman and to explore other aesthetic possibilities in business dress which they would not ordinarily try out.

"Casual day" is a phenomenon which is gaining widespread practice among American businesses. Periodically, the traditional business dress codes are suspended and employees are encouraged to wear more casual clothing to work. The phenomenon of casual day illustrated the importance of clothing to building group cohesion and comradery among employees. The formality of businesswear confirms and reinforces similarities among employees. When the formal norms are suspended, casual images must also be similar among employees, and universally adopted in order that individuals do not set themselves apart from or above the rest of the group. The case of casual day also illustrates the role symbolism of being dressed for work in clothing that differentiates one's work activities as different from other aspects of daily life.

Sexual Harassment and Dress

A difference of perceptions was found among working women about what sexual harassment is and what causes it. Women were concerned with maintaining a businesslike appearance and demeanor to avoid provoking sexual advances or attention to their sexuality.

Of primary importance to these women was a standard of modesty in dress, as well as the avoidance of "sexy", "flashy", and for some, "feminine" styles of dress. These women believe that although dress should not be and is not the most important factor at work, it is a factor women should be aware of to protect themselves.

The majority of women felt that dress could be a factor in sexual harassment cases and as such, it should be allowable evidence in court cases. While the participants acknowledged dress as a possibly misleading cue, they did not feel it excused misbehavior on the part of alleged sexual harassers.

Conclusions

Through the inductive, interpretive methods employed in this research, the meanings of dress for business women's everyday experiences were explored. A variety of meanings were identified for which dress can become a vehicle. These meanings were organized into a grounded theory conceptual model which demonstrates that some appearance meanings are positive qualities for business women to present, while others pose threats to business credibility and success. Previous research taking empirical approaches has demonstrated that dress does sometimes significantly affect the perception of business women. The present research allows scholars to do more than just speculate on why dress variation in experimental designs are consistently found to influence ratings of job skills, professional characteristics, likelihood of employment and the many other variables which have been studied. The findings presented here offer one possible organization of the meanings carried by dress which are employed by subjects in their ratings of stimulus persons in past research. The present

research began with the given assertion that dress *can* and *does* affect business experiences and began to probe the questions *Why* and *How* does dress assert its influence?

Theoretical perspectives

Neither Warren's (1949) role change theory nor Solomon's (1983) perspectives on symbolic self-completion theory were strongly supported. If Warren's theory were to be supported, dress images would become more homogeneous as women settle into roles in business. On the contrary, dress which is considered appropriate for business has become much more varied in the last 15-20 years.

Solomon's (1983) first proposition that the level of role experience affects the degree of dependence on symbols of the role appears to be supported by these findings; younger women were more concerned with conformity to business dress standards than were older women. However, a generational effect may actually be the driving factor in women's attitudes toward conformity in business dress symbols. The second proposition that individuals adopting roles not previously held would depend on role symbolism was supported. Participants in male-dominated industries where women have not yet established themselves were more concerned with conforming to fairly rigid standards of appearance. The third proposition that individuals would be more concerned with role symbolism during role transition was not supported. Women did not report more concern with dress when changing from one career position to another.

Limitations of study

The interpretive method has as its goal that of understanding meaning of the experiences studied. This research explored women's experiences of business dress and drew conclusions, including the generation of a grounded theory model of the ideal business image for women. The size of the sample (24) and the methods employed are not intended to facilitate the generalization of findings to other populations or groups.

Studying a sample selected from business women in Des Moines, Iowa, was an opportunity to examine the experiences of women who might be considered representative of urban "middle America." However, the experiences of these women will most likely be different from women in other localities due to the character of the business and social climate of the region. Therefore, these findings cannot be considered generalizable to or representative of women's experiences in other localities.

Although the specific findings concerning the details of dress images which are incorporated in the grounded theory model of women's ideal business images are not generalizable, the model itself is abstract and theoretical. It may be useful for and should be tested in a variety of locations and with different populations. The concrete dress images and their meanings may shift, but the conceptual structure of the model may be just as applicable in other contexts as it is in Des Moines, Iowa. For example, dress images which constitute the concept of "conservatism" in the model may shift and change if the model were explored with a sample of business women from New York City or Los Angeles, but the concept of conservatism itself might still be important to women as a meaning component of business dress.

Implications for further research

It was not clear whether Solomon's (1983) perspective on symbolic self-completion theory was effective in explaining women's use of appearance symbols. A generational effect seemed to be at work in the case of these participants. Further research is needed to explore and clarify this problem. Future studies need to explore dependence on symbolism for self-completion in comparison with and in light of the fact that women at various levels of their career most likely also differ in age cohorts, thereby having different sets of attitudes and outlook on life.

The grounded theory model of the ideal business image for women provides many rich opportunities for further exploration and testing. This study suggested that all six meaning components exist for women in all positions and that variation in emphasis of meanings in dress may occur due to particular industries and women's personal priorities. This proposition should be tested further. These variables can be operationalized and explored. Empirical hypotheses may be generated based on this model and tested through both qualitative and quantitative means. For instance, one potential hypothesis is that the meaning components of the model have different priority rankings in different businesses. Further, the closer the match of priorities between business and employee, the more satisfied the employee would be in that position. Do women adopt the priorities of the company in order to maintain harmony between their values about dress and those of their job as might be suggested by the majority of women reporting no tension between personal and job priorities?

Such questions, and others might be addressed through continuing use of interpretive methods. As the body of interpretive findings grows, however, consistent and contradictory

findings will emerge from which more specific questioning can be derived. These hypotheses can then be tested through more and more specific means using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, ultimately leading to the refinement of the model and the formal development and testing of theory.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview schedule**In-person:**

Thank you for agreeing to meet me and discuss your work experiences with me. As I said on the telephone, this is part of my research on women and their use of appearance images as part of career development and worklife.

I'll be asking you about your experiences with dress and your career, and general issues related to women's appearances at work (and your sexual harassment case). I'd like to tape record our discussion if that is okay with you? (pause) Our discussion will be held in complete confidentiality, so when the interview is transcribed, no names will be included with any of the information we talk about. Also, if there are any questions which you feel uncomfortable answering, please feel free to refrain. There are no right or wrong answers; I very much want to know what you think and feel about the subjects we discuss.

Shall we begin?

Work situations/Roles/role changes:

Let's start off with some background information about your career development. Tell me a little about yourself and your career? How long have you been in this field? What other types of jobs have you had in your career?

Tell me a little about your job and describe the company you work(ed) for? How long have you worked here (there).

Describe the environment you work in. What kind of contact do you have with people in your work environment? What activities define your interactions with people? Do you work with the public as well as other people in the office? What's the proportion of men and women in your work group?

Tell me about the positions of women and men in the company? Are there women or men supervisors you work for? Women and men whom you supervise? How many women are there in executive or management positions?

Please tell me about starting this job...how did you first determine what to wear to work here?

Professional ideal images:

Would you say that there is a standard "Look" for women in your company/field? Is there a specified dress code or an unwritten set of "DOS and don'ts"?

- standard appearance stereotype/role? How much is the standard followed?
- flexibility in creating personal image?

Can you describe what you generally wear to work?

- Types of outfits, fabrics, level of formality, styles?

(using photos as stimuli)

Looking through these photos, could you pick out a few which look similar to the kind of appearance you try to create for yourself? Are there styles here you wear a lot? Styles you would not wear at all? Why? If there are not any appropriate styles here, please explain why.

Compare what you wear to work with styles you like; are they the same, or are there things you like but would not be able to wear to work or feel would be inappropriate? Why?

Personal interest in appearance:

Do you think women in general have standards for appearance in American Business? What are those standards? Do you feel comfortable with those standards personally? Where do you think the standards or rules for appearance come from? Women themselves?

Some would say that our culture's stress on women's attractive appearance is a way to prevent women's achievement of true freedom and equality with men. How do you respond to that idea?

Do you like more classic, traditional looks or do you like more variety in colors and styles in your dress? Do you see clothing as a creative outlet? How do you put together an image that is both professional and creative? Can men and women be creative with their appearance and still look professional?

Changes over time

Has your image changed when you changed jobs? How? Times when you've needed to be more formal? Casual? Times when you felt freer to express yourself through your style?

Do you have children? Did you work during your maternity? Were there any changes in your experiences with dress due to wearing maternity clothing?

Were you ever involved in the "dress for success" look with formal tailored dark suits and light blouses?

Do you think the level of formality of your dress has changed in any way over your career? Increased or decreased? Explain.

Do you consider yourself interested in fashion? Is it important to you either personally or in your job to be concerned with fashion? Do you like to or are you able to follow fashion trends? Or do you sometimes need ignore trends or let certain trends pass by because they might not be good to wear at work?

If you would reflect on what is attractive or "sexy" in your opinion, would you say that the level of sexiness of clothing has changed over time? Or the level of sexy at work?

Influence of Dress on Work interactions:

Do people at work ever comment on your appearance or that of other women? For example? And who makes comments? Do you enjoy attention when others notice your appearance?

Do you notice how others look at work? Women? Men? What types of things do you notice?

How important do you think appearances are at work? Does appearance affect work relationships? How?

Do you ever use your appearance to make yourself feel more confident at work?

Can you describe a situation in which you would do so? What kind of image would you create?

What does it mean to look feminine? Powerful? Do you think women can look feminine and powerful at the same time? What image conveys authority?

Do you think that appearance is more important for women than for men? Are the standards different? Do you think women or men care more about appearance? Why?

Can you think of any situation where a man's or woman's appearance might have undermined what others thought about them as professionals? Or enhanced what others thought?

Has dress increased or decreased in importance for you as you have continued in your career? Has it been more or less important in different positions?

Sexuality issues at work:

Are you ever worried about how men might perceive how you look?

Have any men at work ever commented about your appearance? If a man commented on your appearance, would it be the same as a woman's comment? Would you take it the same way?

Do you think women should be careful about looking "sexy" at work?

Describe what you believe would be sexually provocative dress. Would what you have described be considered out of line, in your job?

Do you think men consider how a woman looks to be an invitation for sexual interest? Do men want women to look sexy at work?

[Could you tell me about your experiences on the job that led you to file charges of sexual harassment.

Did the person you had the conflict with ever say anything about how you looked or dressed? Was it part of their defense in your legal proceeding?

Do you think dress had any bearing on the situation?

Do you think descriptions of appearance should be accepted as evidence in legal matters?

APPENDIX B: PERSONAL DATA SHEET

Education (check the highest level you have achieved)

- ☐ High School diploma
☐ Some college or technical training
☐ 4 year degree
☐ Advanced professional degree

Occupation _____

Name or type of business _____

How many people are there in your office/division? _____

How many people are there in the whole company? _____

Please circle the number which best approximates your position in your organization's hierarchy (chain of command). Assume that level 6 is held by top management.

6	top
5	
4	
3	
2	
1	bottom

Number of years worked at this business? _____

Number of years worked outside the home? _____

Marital status:

☐ Married ☐ Single ☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed

Children? _____

Your Age? _____

APPENDIX C: TELEPHONE CONTACT SCRIPT

Initial telephone contact and invitation to participate**Phone Intro:**

My name is Patti Kimle. I am a graduate student at Iowa State University and I am studying working women's appearance and problems related to appearance that they encounter on the job. I am interested in talking with you about being a business woman and how you deal with appearance issues at work, such as dressing appropriately and how appearances impact personal interactions.

(Last fall, I talked with Roxanne Conlin about the problem of sexual harassment and the use of dress as an issue of evidence in court proceedings. She gave me your name and said you might be willing to talk with me about your experiences of sexual harassment. This is part of my research on appearance and dress as part of women's career development.)

The interview would probably take about an hour. It will be held in strict confidence. I will not disclose your identity in any way in materials after the interview. Would you be willing to participate?

_____ (yes/no) _____

(If yes, arrange time and place) (If no, thank them for their time)

APPENDIX D: CODING GUIDE FOR INTERVIEW DATA ANALYSIS

Coding Guide

1. Participant's interpersonal contact at work:
 - A. contact with direct office group
 - i. High
 - ii. medium
 - iii. low
 - B. contact with public (consumers of product/service) (i, ii, iii)
 - C. contact across groups in company, including upper mgmt. (i, ii, iii)
 - D. contact with other business professionals outside co. (i, ii, iii)
 - E. phone contact. (i, ii, iii)
2. Gender composition of work group and company
 - A. Office/group balanced between men and women
 - B. Office/group predominantly female
 - C. Office/group predominantly male
 - D. Company management/executives balanced between men and women
 - E. Company management/executives predominantly female
 - F. Company management/executives predominantly male
 - G. N/A
4. Company dress code issues:
 - A. freedom in dress; influence of company over staff
 - B. gender equality in specifications
 - C. pants for women
 - D. dress codes define items, not image
 - E. dress code for:
 - i. image
 - ii. liability protection in case of harassment
 - iii. discouragement of harassment
 - F. modesty
 - G. Enforcement
 - H. Codes:
 - i. written
 - ii. unwritten

5. Role playing and image
 - A. image part of role
 - B. role modeling
 - C. active seeking of image information
6. Career issues
 - A. Equality on the job
 - B. Reality of being female in male dominated work world
 - C. Need to de-emphasize female to fit in
 - D. Executives and supervisors promote those who "look like them", i.e. men
 - E. Treatment of women by others in careers
 - F. Actions by women (working style)
 - G. Work and family issues/conflicts for women
7. Attractiveness issues
 - A. advantage to look attractive/Appropriate
 - B. disadvantage to be too attractive
 - C. "look" of women who have succeeded
 - D. discrimination based on attractiveness
 - E. discrimination based on body type/weight
8. Business Dress
 - A. existence of traditional, conservative image is a fact of life
 - B. once standard is met, dress becomes a "non-issue"
 - C. formality of business dress eliminates attention to personal
 - D. men's symbols constitute dress for both men and women
 - E. changes over time
 - F. depends on level in co.
 - G. depends on type of business
 - H. dress to level above, "dress for success"
- 8* Appropriateness of dress for business
 - A. formality level
 - B. modesty
 - C. situations at work (e.g. travel, activities)
 - D. physical comfort

9. Origins of Women's ideal images:
 - A. women's image is the nearest approximation of man's business image
 - B. fashion industry defines how women should look (submission to others' definitions of women)
 - C. women participate as consumers in defining the fashions for work (proactive in self-definition)
 - D. dress is important to women; "women dress for other women"

10. Creativity/Fashion in dress
 - A. Wardrobe issues
 - 1) professional wardrobe is creative and fashionable
 - 2) creativity must be reserved for non work wardrobe
 - 3) dress not a big outlet for personal creativity
 - 4) broad range of options are available for women which are professional and fashionable
 - B. Personally
 - 1) image demands suppression of personal taste/style
 - 2) important to a person based on socialization into that need
 - 3) fashion implies \$\$ success
 - 4) implies awareness of trends in the world around one
 - 5) positive evidence of one's creativity
 - C. Professionally
 - 1) women at high levels of organizations can be more creative than middle management.
 - 2) Differences between staff and management people
 - 3) must be cautiously adopted, let most trends go by, but don't allow oneself to look outdated
 - 4) fashion is an inherently female phenomenon in business and is detrimental to women

11. Awareness of dress in office group
 - A. Banter about image is common (pos. and neg.)
 - B. Comments may concern conformity vs. individuality (particularly among men)
 - C. Awareness of a worker's appearance may indicate problem (inappropriate dress)
 - D. No comment = good job
 - E. Banter between men and women
 - F. Men vs. women's awareness of other men and women

12. Appearance and dress as a personal issue
- A. one must get past appearance to get to person "underneath"
 - B. appearance is integral to person and can't be separated
 - C. person perception is a natural human process and can't be eliminated
 - D. first impressions are important and lasting
 - E. first impressions can be deceiving and detrimental
13. Appearance and job performance
- A. appearance is an indicator of personal approach to job
 - B. appearance is a reflection of company image
 - C. appearance meanings:
 - i. professionalism
 - ii. self-awareness
 - iii. conscientiousness in job performance
 - iv. personality
 - v. similarity to audience (put the other at ease)
 - D. appearance and self-image
- 14* Appearance and sexuality
15. "CASUAL DAY"
- A. conformity to a new standard
 - B. an employee can become "outsider" in formal dress on casual day
 - C. there is an inherent risk in lowering image standards
 - D. attitude and approach toward work is different on casual day
16. Wardrobe management issues
- A. traditional suits is convenient/coordinating/flexible
 - B. suits are boring
 - C. must pay more attention to coordinating items when shopping more than dresses
 - D. economically dis/advantageous

17. Femininity and power
 - A. style definers
 - B. femininity is a personality trait, as well as appearance
 - C. power is a management characteristic, "
 - D. fem. and power are mutually exclusive
 - E. fem. and power are combinable
18. Comparisons to men's dress styles
 - A. men's options
 - B. men's emphasis on aesthetics
19. Involvement in and importance of appearance for women vs. men
 - A. women more involved
 - B. men more involved
 - C. equal involvement
 - D. Appearance more important in judgments/perceptions of women
20. Maternity issues
 - A. difficult to find appropriate image clothing
 - B. cost of appropriate image clothing is prohibitive due to limited time of usefulness
 - C. maternity requires a lowering/change in image standard which can lead to vulnerable feeling/RISK
 - D. acceptability of different standard during maternity depends on
 - i. # of younger women in group
 - ii. formality of initial image
 - E. pregnancy emphasizes female and personal
 - F. pregnancy is intrusion of family/outside life into workplace

21. Sexual harassment issues

- A. increased levels of awareness of dress
 - i. emphasis on modesty in dress ideas
 - ii. definers for provocative dress (body exposure)
- B. interpretations of communication of sexuality in dress
- C. women responsible for dress messages
- D. employer responsibility for harassment problems
- E. belief that harassment is unrelated to dress
- F. opinion about admissibility of dress as evidence in court cases
 - i. admissible, women can be held responsible in conflict
 - ii. inadmissible, dress does not indicate consent or invitation.
- G. Harassment is a power struggle

3. Descriptors for participant's personal image:

- A. traditional business suit, strict tailoring, jacket required
- B. semi-tailored look, based on sportswear separates, coordinates, less strict silhouette
- C. dressy professional, sportswear, separates, knits, dresses
- D. Definers:
 - i. colors
 - ii. patterns, textures
 - iii. fabrics
- E. Definitions of "conservative"
- F. personal striving toward a look of "class or sophistication"
- G. appropriateness of look for business depends on
 - i. level of formality of items
 - ii. modesty
- H. maturity demands certain style concessions (longer skirts, less form fitting styles)
- I. Body type demands certain style concessions