

What Does Appearance Communicate in the Workplace?

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Abstract

There comes a time where walking into the workplace becomes a war zone. Departments and executives are competing, the messaging of the company becomes baffling, and everyone begins to look sloppy. But what separates one from another is how they communicate with each other, non-verbally.

Over the decades, psychologists and communication specialists have analyzed and identified the ways of communication. Body language and clothing choice are key factors in identifying one's work ethic, but have been misconstrued. Aesthetics, the physical appearance of an individual based on cosmetic or genetic development, has impacted the workplace culture for organizations everywhere. One company, Abercrombie & Fitch, has battled lawsuits dealing with the hiring and treatment of employees based on their appearance. MSNBC and *Elle Magazine* conducted a poll on communication in the workplace, which can be found in the literature review of this paper. These findings, in addition to many more, are what have developed and crafted the question between appearance and communication.

Through field observation and private interviews, many perceptions of physical appearance has not only shined a light on certain issues in today's society, but has also allowed employees of various organizations the opportunity to share their stories. By having a mixed methodology, data was collected from two different field observations and interviews were held amongst four individuals, all areas dominated by women. It was found that clothing choice may not have an effect on work ethic, thus communicating on a spectrum based by the industry. However, physical appearance was found to have an impact based on the industry. Please refer to the methodology and discussion for further information. As a result of mixed methodology

and research, it can be inferred that yes, beauty does have a place in communication, but there is no definite answer as to why or what it exactly communicates in its entirety.

Literature Review

For decades, the workplace has been an environment that is defined by the work culture and the people in it. However, in recent years, it seems that employee appearance may be a key factor in workplace performance. Through interviews, surveys, and observation, researchers have sought out the impact of appearance and how it impacts those in a particular environment.

“Lookism”, or the construction of standards for beauty and attractiveness, followed by the judgments made based on appearance, defined by the Oxford Dictionary, is prevalent in the culture and society that we live in. Hypothetical and recent situations surround this issue in the workplace but not in terms of whether or not someone was appropriately dressed for an interview. In 2004, Abercrombie & Fitch Co., settled a class action lawsuit that addressed the racially discriminatory hiring practices within the company (Zakrzewski 2005). Applicants involved were of African American, Latino, and Asian American backgrounds, and were forced to work in positions that would keep them out of the public eye. In the culture of the company, their definition of beauty or appropriate appearance lies within their hiring practices.

According to Zakrzewski, attractive people are said to be viewed as more intelligent, honest, and more sensitive. Not only does appearance affect the ability to engage in social activities, it can hinder the chance of employment. While seeking employment, there are many other factors that play part, such as social cues, body language, dress (not physical features), and much more. Most importantly, the ability to effectively communicate is what ultimately will help gain employment. On the contrary, ‘Lookism’ is theoretically a way to judge the performance of an individual based on features beyond their control.

Studies published in the Journal of Consumer Research were set out to observe those who strayed from the 'norms' of the workplace, in addition to a retail setting. The work was done by Silvia Bellezza, a doctoral student, and two Harvard professors. Although much of the work was done in a lab on informed students, the team also looked at places in the community that served a much larger audience, which totaled to 150 participants. The observation found that participants conformed with those around them, such as group identity and trust. According to their field study, pedestrians were thought to believe that someone who was well-presented had money to buy something in the store, in this case was a luxury retailer. What's interesting is that the shop attendants had the opposite approach. Bellezza's research found that associates were confident that those wearing more relaxed attire were more confident in their purchases and would put more effort into making a purchase (Wang 2014). Additionally, when the environment was turned into professional, rather than retail, other factors were found in whether appearance has anything to do with success. Francesca Gino, an associate business administration professor at Harvard Business School and an author on the paper decided to test the theory previously sought out in the retail environment. After wearing red Converse (vibrant and autonomous signal), made her stand out and she later found that individuals who identified on a questionnaire as having a higher need to be unique were more likely to give a higher rating. Be mindful that the vibrant footwear was worn to a teaching event, which lasted one day. It is interesting to see that attendees pay attention to attire. It may be inferred that those with unique personalities will in fact, become more attentive if they see others also show their uniqueness.

Interesting enough, MSNBC and *Elle Magazine* conducted a survey in 2007, where men and women were surveyed on whether or not appearance had an impact in various faces of the workplace.

“The advice she got from a campaign manager? ‘Wear three-inch heels every day because you’ll look much more powerful.’ “

Those who participate in dressing in a more sophisticated manner tend to be individuals who are looked more into. According to the survey by MSNBC and *Elle*, female bosses who were considered “attractive” were rated competent 58% of the time. Dressing for success tends to be an alternative to distinguishing someone who has a high goals and aspirations, in comparison to someone who may not dress the same. Wearing heels, for instance, allow individuals to stand taller and have better posture, something that strong leaders have. On the contrary, an employee wearing flats or oxfords may the opposite reaction amongst their colleagues. Much of this poll was reflective of women, but men certainly had their input as well. They [men] were more likely to believe that women judge them based on work ethic or accomplishments while in the workplace. Personable attributes were ranked lower, the opposite of what women were thought to be judged by. Relating this to ‘lookism,’ men are not judged on their appearance as much as women, allowing their upward mobility to be contingent on their work ethic and accomplishments, as mentioned above.

“You’d be a fool if you didn’t use your looks to your advantage and make the most with what you’ve got,” he notes. “Do not pretend it doesn’t matter. It’s a huge part of life in the 21st century,” said management psychologist Ken Siegel.

Siegel’s statement itself is unfortunately a reality in today’s workforce. Lili Tan, associate editor at *Elle Magazine* commented on the results of the survey by MSNBC and the publication. Tan stated that it’s interesting that attractive people are more competent and could be seen as more intelligent over colleagues who were less attractive. On the same note, those who were less attractive succeeded through nepotism and hard work, not social skills and communication

(Tahmincioglu 2007). It can be inferred that individuals who are 'more attractive' are more confident, therefore have stronger communication skills. However, Silvia Bellezza's research counters this research, again stating that the confidence, not the appearance, is what makes an individual successful or communicates 'a sense of belonging' (Feltman 2014). Conforming individuals tend to be more insecure about themselves, providing a lapse in judgment and the belief that someone is unable to do their work or do it well.

Terms of employment are rather intricate, as the United States Government has made it impossible (consciously) to refuse the hiring of a candidate based on race, religion, sex, etc... Relating back to the concept of 'lookism,' most employers and candidates are unconscious of theory, making employment discrimination difficult to target. It is also becoming one of the more researched aspects of discrimination in the country (Zakas 2005). Other interesting components include higher salaries of attractive people, and whether or not their looks had an impact on their gain. Looking back at it and comparing to Fetman and Wang's article on Silvia Bellezza's research alludes to the question of someone's self-esteem and confidence impacts their appearance and productivity in the workforce (Biddle & Hamermesh, 1994). Obesity was also included in appearance-discrimination research, alluding that individuals who were obese were lazy and incompetent (Bellizzi & Hasty, 2000, p. 386).

In the world of corporate America and working with clients, it is key that all participating parties are engaged. Working with a client can lead to many questions, including whether or not they will take you seriously. For instance, if two public relations agencies are trying to gain a new client. Agency #1 has a large team of seasoned professionals, both men and women of diverse backgrounds and attractive individuals. The company has three awards and has been active for five years. Agency #2 has a small, intimate team with a mixed culture (employees and

personalities) and has won over 15 awards and has been active for over 20 years. The brand, for instance is small boutique shoe company and is looking to expand beyond the tri-state area. During the agency pitch, both agencies provide excellent ideas to boost revenue and the brand's reputation across all platforms. Agency #1 has a higher budget than Agency #2, but the company will do whatever it takes to make their boutique known, regardless of the price. If the ideas and concepts are similar and the only differential is the price, it could be assumed that the company would go with the less cost. On the contrary, the company will select the younger agency. Why? The employees are diverse and are attractive, leading to appearances such as promotional events. Why does this matter? Attractive people buy things other attractive people have. Lookism has a high place in this scenario because the boutique company knows and understands its clientele. They would rather spend more on a promotional campaign with individuals who will gain attention without the product, than have promotional models who are not as attractive and may not put their all into the company. An individual can be paid \$15 an hour for promoting a shoe at a local Women's Conference, but if the person doesn't feel confident, neither will the consumer. The same goes for in-office promotions. "the more an organization or position deals with the public, the greater likelihood that an attractive person will be hired, promoted, and receive greater compensation than the less attractive person" (Jeffes 1998).

Research has shown little progression of working with workplace discrimination, let alone the exact impact of appearance in the workplace. Interestingly enough, Abercrombie & Fitch is the most popular case of workplace discrimination, as they have had a number of lawsuits or discrepancies. Little research is found on the overall impact of the direct or indirect communication, but rather the perks and what appearance can do for an individual.

Methodology

Throughout the course of research, two types of methodology were used to compare and analyze findings. Participant observation took place on two separate days, at different venues, while interviews were held with individuals in various fields, including retail, law, public relations, and advertising.

Participant Observation: To get a better understanding of how appearance impacts the workplace, I visited two different locations, which will allow for a comparison. On Tuesday, April 8th, 2014, I visited Rue 21, a youthful fashion retailer in The Galleria Mall, located in White Plains, New York. This visit was made between 10am and 12pm. A second location was chosen and was the office of *Westchester Magazine*, located in Rye, New York on Monday, April 14, 2014 between 12:30pm and 2pm.

Because of the nature of research, it was important to visit two different environments and draw comparisons. Both companies have similar laid-back cultures, but the individuals within each had their own take on the environment. Because one environment was in the mall, while the other was in an office, appearance took on different roles (making sales versus looking appropriate for a meeting with the editorial staff).

Rue21: After careful observation of the employees at Rue 21, a mix of workplace cultures really took the dive, as 75% of the employees were fully dressed and appeared to be approachable. One of the employees, a young woman in her early 20s, appeared tired and had on just jeans, a sweatshirt, and UGGs. Her hair was put in a ponytail and she didn't have any makeup on, except for mascara. The other two employees, one being a manager, were dressed as if they actually belonged in the store. By appearing as if they actually 'belonged' in the store, customers were

able to associate who took on the outgoing personality of the store and was enthusiastic about their job (customers asked those who appeared knowledgeable of the product). With the setup of the store, it was fairly simple to observe from the front as a friend shopped the many racks of Rue. One thing I took into account was that the mall had just opened at 10am and there was not much traffic. However, I did notice that even with a potential customers coming in groups of three or more, that the employee who was wearing UGGS did not approach all of the customers. Having heard the side conversations, the manager had her work on one of the walls with new spring/summer merchandise was, rather than assist customers. On the opposite side, the other employee was working with the manager to promote the company fragrances (which I was shown about seven of them). I dubbed this employee as their “promo girl,” as she was going up to customers, providing samples, dressing the promo tables and helping the manager with the front end of the store. What made it interesting was the customers were going to the manager and “promo girl” before they went to the other employee, even though she was closer to them. For about an hour I became confused and had to take an even more careful look at the three employees working. The “promo girl” was placed primarily at the front end of the store, where she was working on both the men’s and women’s side of the store. As an employee, her personality had shown through her outfit, matching the ‘Spring Break’ theme around the store. The men drifted towards this employee and actually purchased some of the products she was promoting, except for one customer who didn’t pay her much mind. The purpose of observing in this establishment was to see the communication in a more relaxed and urban setting.

Westchester Magazine: On Monday, April 14th, I had the opportunity to interview at the home office of the magazine. Now, the factors I took into consideration were that the interview was on a Monday afternoon in an office located in the suburbs. Upon entering the office, I noticed that

the building looked as if it were a large house at one point. This appearance replicated inside, where the setup was very similar to how *Cosmopolitan Magazine* is set up inside the Hearst Building in New York City. Once I entered the office, I was greeted by the receptionist who was dressed in jeans and a feminine blouse. After I checked in and sat down, I observed each employee who walked by me and how they interacted. Of the 10 employees I either spoke with or simply watched, I noticed the one male was dressed business casual (grey slacks and a dark, long sleeve button down, finished with polished black shoes). The women, however, were dressed in skirts and spring-like blouses, dresses, or a grey trousers and light top. Each of the women I came across had some type of heel on, including sandals and pumps. I was expecting this type of attire, but I was not expecting them to compliment me on mine. Their body language was very polished and they strutted with confidence. Not only did this impact my observation, but it also allowed me to draw a few comparisons.

Interviews: After developing a series of questions in relation to beauty, appearance and the workplace, four individuals were interviewed. Throughout the recruitment process, hurdles such as age, gender, and openness were difficult to work with. In the end, the interviews did not cultivate the intentional findings. Instead, responses involved many viewpoints based on industry and experience level.

Themes: Throughout the interviews, it was found that more women were open about the topic of appearance in the workplace, rather than men. While interviewing a male participant, the 36 year old district manager of a family owned retail company, stated that he found it interesting that no other male wanted to participate. Other themes included women, ages 23-26, but of different, including Asian, Romanian, Hispanic, and Native American ethnic backgrounds. However, the participants identified with the white/Caucasian race. Industries included retail, marketing,

public relations, and publishing. All participants were employed, except for one who is pursuing a Master's degree in business.

Questions: Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, as each participant had their own spin on the questions and how they related to their industry. When asked if they would dress up for an interview, all of the women stated they would dress up. On the contrary, the 23 year old Asian professional stated that she would dress in business casual (slacks, blazer, flats/heels, but even that would be based on the type of company she was interviewing with. Other participants, including the 26 year old, who recently left the public relations industry, stated that regardless of the field, candidates should dress in a business suit with heels (no flats at all). She went on to say that this added more to the candidate's credibility and actually would be an asset to their resume and personal brand.

Lookism: As a result of recent discrimination lawsuits and research, the concept of 'lookism' was an important aspect of each interview. When asked, 75% of participants knew what 'lookism' was, but not entirely in depth, while 25% had no idea what it was and how it related to the interview topic. The individual who was unaware of what the subject was, received a clear definition and stated that she had mixed feelings and that it would be based on the industry. What is interesting is that the participant is a 24 year old female with experience in the advertising and graphic design industry. Other participants, including the male, looked at this as a topic of importance and expressed that he felt companies should have strong policies on discrimination during the hiring process.

“I have heard comments on how the applicants are dressed. But I wouldn't judge based on dress code, I would just think some are more serious than others. After being with the

company for 10 years, I have never heard of an incident involving racial or appearance discrimination, otherwise. For our company, it is a matter of our location, which happen to be mostly in the south, so there tends to be various body and racial applicants” – 36 year old District Manager of a family retailer.

Working With Discrimination: As employees and candidates move up in their respective organizations, it is important to understand issues within the corporate culture. None of the participants personally faced discrimination based on the appearance, however, two participants each, had encountered a colleague in the respective workplaces that had been affected by lookism or appearance-based discrimination.

Topics ranged from individuals talking about other co-workers and how they are lazy because of the body type (particularly a little heavier than what they deemed ‘normal’), to being in a particular position for many years and working their way up. The 26 year old Romanian professional spoke about her experience in administration. She went on to say that while she was with her company, a colleague was interviewing for a higher position and was given a very difficult time to move up. She went on to say that administrative is the most difficult field to find upward mobility, in her opinion and through her experience. The 23 year old Asian professional in the publishing industry had a similar story, but dealt more with gender and race.

“While in the hospitality industry, a colleague of mine was of black decent, and was extremely dark skinned,” said the publishing professional. “We worked with reservations, dining, so the concierge of the hotel. I would always hear comments being made about her saying she was lazy and too slow. She was only with us for about four months before she was terminated, but there was not a known reason for it.”

Corporate Culture: Each workplace environment is different and is based on how employees approach each situation. A 24 year old female Senior Account Manager and Graphic Designer, spoke about her company's culture and how she and her colleagues adapted to the environment. She described her workplace as a fun and relaxed atmosphere, with a relaxed dress code, which showed the firm's "flexibility." She went on to say that her workplace had an environment that made its employees eager and motivates them to do their best. However, when a client is scheduled for a visit, the demeanor changes and all employees conform to a more professional environment.

Results:

Both forms of methodology brought different characteristics of the workplace to the surface, including the difficulties faced when trying to move up, to not being dressed accordingly and being placed in a different area of the job site. During participant observation, it was found that in both areas of work, it was important for employees to be dressed according to their industry, which came to a shock when mentioned during the interviews. After mentioning Rue21 and how the 'promo girl' and the other employee were dressed, interviewees were curious as to why the two employees were in radically different parts of the store. But what is even more interesting and brings more curiosity to the observation is the phrase "Look Good, Feel Good."

After returning to Rue21 a month after the initial observation, a manager asked if a customer needed any help and referred her to the 'promo girl.' Afterwards, the employee asked what happened to her co-worker, and was informed that she had been released due to her lack in work ethic and customer satisfaction. Since the company prides itself on customer service, it was obvious that the appearance of the store, which included its employees, was a vital part of their marketing and sales strategies.

On the other hand, *Westchester Magazine* had a simpler atmosphere, as it is a publication that has an established dress code and work ethic expectations. The results were anticipated and ranked high on satisfaction, as it was inferred that the employees would adhere to a more solid environment and culture. In comparison, the interviewee employed with the advertising industry has similar attributes. Being able to dress in a more casual form of attire allowed each office to be creative, but maintain a level of professionalism. The difference, however, is that *Westchester Magazine* did dress a little more professionally, as they work with clients and reporters on a daily basis.

As a result of these comparisons, it can be inferred that how an individual dresses, in addition to their aesthetics, does in fact, play a part in one's employment. Not only does this allow for information about the hiring or longevity process in each respective industry, but it also shows that the more customer service-based establishments used 'lookism' more than others. If an individual was released from the hospitality industry for what could have been a result of her weight and it's negative connotation of heavier individuals are 'lazy,' or someone not dressed appropriately for work (retail), it is about satisfying the customer. On the other hand, the firms, including advertising, public relations, and the print publication, were all more relaxed.

Discussion

Throughout the process, many hurdles were encountered. One of the most interesting was during the interview process. Only one male agreed to be interviewed, out of the eight that were approached. Interestingly enough, this issue can be compared to the MSNBC an *Elle Magazine* poll, which stated that men actually were more involved in communication in the workplace. Interesting, yes. But not only does this push sexism, but it also tells employees that men tend to communicate more in the workplace, considering they are sometimes "exempt" from the social

norms of the workplace. The interview mentioned that men were more vocal about the workplace, which also relates to one of the interviewees. During her interview with MSNBC, Lili Tan, associate editor of *Elle Magazine*, said that they found in their survey that female bosses who were dressed more appropriate to their role were deemed more competent than one who was not. It was also said that individuals who were more attractive were considered more intelligent and had the ability to succeed. Does this relate to real life scenarios? Probably, due to the fact that some industries have the most ridiculous time frames to move up. But, why does the look of someone's facial features or body type define their work ethic?

Non-verbal communication, social norms, and body language can incorporate so many feelings and really decide whether or not an individual is communicating effectively. As a result of interviews and participant observation, appearance does in fact effect work ethic, thus communicating an individual's view on their work environment. As a mixture, words around the office or at home by another colleague, can in fact impair someone's motivation. The woman who was let go after four months, knew there were negative things being said about her alleged laziness. What is interesting is that although she was identified as a heavy person, the color of her skin did not even play a part in the situation. Many associate obesity or those who are overweight as incompetent because it is assumed they are lazy. In fact, some of them are even placed in offices or workstations away from the front entrance (depends on the location), to make them "exercise" or hide them from visitors. Is this discrimination? Very much so, but it also proves that 'lookism' is as real as any other form of discrimination.

Other areas of interest include company culture and setting. This brought a lot of attention to the floor during interviews, which really set the bar for all of the interviewees. Not only did the setting provide an idea of how employees work in their respective settings, but also

showed that each industry looks at the hiring process differently. A magazine publication may look for individuals who reflect their message. This may result in hiring individuals who are confident, attractive, or have a great taste in fashion (or whatever their publication may put out), but shouldn't be the only thing that makes someone qualified for a position. There is not right or wrong answer, therefore, lookism and other types of discrimination communicate whether or not someone is competent, thus downing a company's credibility.

Conclusion

As a result of the various workplace industries and employee relations, there is so much that goes into non-verbal communication and appearance. Whether it is believed or not, appearance does not affect an individual's capability to work; it is dependent on what individuals around them say about them that can alter the work ethic. What appearance does, in fact communicate is how far they will allow someone to dictate their work ethic and environment because of how they look. Keep in mind that men have a higher non-verbal communication outcome, as many of them, as mentioned during methodology, did not want to speak about their work experience, but did in fact, respond to the survey from MSNBC and *ELLE Magazine*. This, in and of itself, provides more than enough information to state that non-verbal communication as a whole, is prevalent in the workplace and has more of an effect than appearance and the concept of 'lookism.'

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