African American male executive dress: issues of aesthetics, conformity and ethnic identity

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African American male executive dress:
Issues of aesthetics, conformity and ethnic identity

by

Harriet Jean McLeod

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Textiles and Clothing
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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Harriet Jean McLeod

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
DEDICATION

To the memory of my parents-
Wallace and Lovie
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I wish to acknowledge and thank the 15 African American men who participated in this study. They graciously gave their time and candidly shared their thoughts with me. It was my intention to capture the essence of their comments and present them so that others may be enlightened.

I also wish to acknowledge the not so small network of friends, colleagues, and mentors who constantly nudged me to completion of this research. A few whose names I must mention because of their tremendous help - Brecca Farr, Thelma Harding, Phyllis Harris, Micki Johns, Sherry Schofield-Tomschin, and Carlie Tartakov.

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INTRODUCTION

The traditional dress symbols of white corporate male America have been clearly coded for over one hundred years resulting in what may be considered a precise road map of appropriate dress for newcomers. However, current research focusing on female professionals in this traditionally white male environment find that the well established business dress code creates tensions for women newer to the business executive arena. Women generally engage in a more varied dress aesthetic than do men (i.e., variety in colors, textures, and styles). The restricted code of men's business suits is in sharp contrast to women's elaborated codes. A major contribution of current research is the understanding of how gender, a social construct, affects the experiences of women, as well as men in business environments.

To date, appearance management has not been the focus of research examining ethnicity in the business environment. References to the dress of minority executives or managers has been incidental to anecdotes that describe discrimination toward African Americans in their professional roles (Cose, 1993) or advice in the popular press from veterans and career development specialists on how to avoid problems by dressing in a certain way (Baskerville, 1992, Lesly, 1993). Because the U.S. is becoming more ethnically diverse, it is necessary to engage in scholarly inquiry to understand how different groups view the importance of appearance management in business environments. Bicultural
membership may generate different or a great variety of meanings associated with business dress.

African American males have been entering executive and management positions in the corporate and administrative environments in greater numbers since the 1960's. Two general paths of adjustment to these new roles seem plausible for African Americans as newcomers to corporate America. African American males as members of a subculture in our society may prefer and practice dress behavior that is at variance with this image. In contrast, African Americans mindful of their ethnicity and previous discrimination may engage in greater degrees of appearance management than their white counterparts.

The present research examines how ethnicity, also a social construct, affects the dress motivations and preferences of African American male executives and managers in business settings. To be more specific, aesthetics and conformity as related to ethnic identity are analyzed to understand how they influence this group's professional dress. By so doing, this study moves toward an understanding of the African American males' perspective regarding business dress.

As this is exploratory research, a qualitative approach was used to gain an understanding of the issues pertinent to the informants. Qualitative methodology was used to seek answers to why and what this group chose for their professional attire. Preferences specific to the informants as African American males were examined which move toward an emic understanding of the relationship between business clothing and this subgroup.
Using a semi-structured interview format, African American business men in Des Moines, Iowa, were queried about their professional dress. The informants were asked to discuss their impressions of business dress and how useful dress was to them in their professional roles. Questions about the informants' personal preferences for business dress were posed, as well as questions about any tension that may exist between their personal preference and their company's prescribed dress code. Also, the informants were asked to comment on any other experiences or reflections they felt were important in the understanding of how dress influenced their experience as business men.

A number of theories were employed to analyze the findings. Symbolic interaction, impression formation, and components of role theory helped the researcher understand how the informants' work identity was negotiated. Stereotyping process and ethnic studies were useful in analyzing discussion specific to the informants' ethnicity.

Issues of aesthetics, conformity and ethnic identity emerged as subthemes that influenced the informants' dress. These themes were discussed in relationship to the theories listed above, as well as potential points of comparison and contrast between African American business males and their white male counterparts.

**Purpose**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the dress of African American male executives and managers in business and other organizational
environments. Issues surrounding aesthetics, conformity and ethnic identity are explored to understand how they are negotiated within the professional roles that the men occupy.

**Definitions**

**African American:** Person born in the United States from African ancestry.

**Appearance management:** All cognitive processes and actual behaviors that are associated with one's personal appearance (Kaiser, 1990).

**Biculturalism:** Dual socialization process (Valentine, 1971) that enables the individual to learn "... two distinct behavioral repertories for utilization in the minority and majority societies" (de Anda, 1984, p. 102).

**Conformity:** A change in an individual's behavior or attitude in order to achieve consistency based on real or imagined group pressure (Kaiser, 1990).

**Ethnic Group:** "A group set apart from others because of its national origin or distinctive cultural patterns" (Schaefer, 1990, p. 27).

**Hegemony:** Power based on dominance and leadership by a group over other groups. This power is not always enacted through direct coercion but often through indirect and subconscious means (Kaiser, 1990), resulting in "... the imposition of norms, practices, beliefs, and values that reinforce the interests of the upper stratum" (Scupin, 1992, p. 201). The process of hegemony evolves over time and involves "... the gradual but continuous absorption" of allied and even antagonistic groups into similar standards for behaviors and ways of thinking as practiced by the dominant group (Gramsci, 1971, p. 59).

**Organizational culture:** Value, beliefs, and knowledge that define and shape acceptable organizational behavior (Elsass & Veiga, 1994).
Research Questions

Personal Dress Preference

What styles of business dress do executive/managerial black men prefer and what do they actually wear? What sources of information are used by the men to guide their selection of business attire?

Conformity

How do the men compare their personal style of dress with the established dress code of their company? How do the men respond to the dress expectations of their clientele and audiences? Do African American men have a different dress aesthetic from white males that produces a tension in the workplace? How do they feel about the business dress they wear? Do they feel that it fits them?

Ethnic Identity

How does ethnicity shape men's opinions about choice of business dress? Do African American men embrace the professional roles they occupy or are they distanced from them?
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

African Americans participate in varying degrees of bicultural existence as members of the African American subgroup and as members of the U.S. culture at large. An examination of the African American culture is helpful in order to move toward an understanding of the African American male's perspective regarding the efficacy of business dress. To that end, literature that explores the major influences in African American culture is examined. Within this literature, aesthetic and ethnic identity issues are reviewed.

Conformity issues are explored by looking at the role of business dress as a communication tool in corporate culture. Two theories useful in understanding how dress is integral in nonverbal communication - role theory and impression formation are reviewed and their application to the present study is discussed. Research that examined the business dress of women provides useful insights into issues specific to numerical minorities in a professional setting.

Aesthetics and ethnic identity issues related to dress are reviewed as a way of understanding their agency in the appearance management activities of African American male executive/managers. Aesthetics is examined through a socio-political lens, as well as traced through an African influence trail.

Work identity and ethnic identity are at the core of the present study. How these two identities are negotiated is one goal of the research. Literature is reviewed that examines how gender, a social construct, influences the dress of female professionals in a traditionally white male environment. By so doing,
insights useful for analyzing how the social construct of ethnicity can influence dress may be revealed.

Casual day dress is gaining in popularity among U.S. businesses. A review of popular literature reveals some conflicting thoughts about this practice. In the current study, informants' reactions and participation in this practice are discussed.

African American Culture

African American culture has been shaped by hegemonic practices (i.e., slavery, segregation, discrimination), extant African philosophical and aesthetic influences, and United States mainstream culture. African American preferences and involvement in dress can therefore be examined as a product of these simultaneous influences. The following sections examine hegemonic practices in the U.S. to understand how African American males' dress can be interpreted as a reaction to hegemony in the workplace. Additionally, African influences that shape aesthetics and stylistic preferences of this group are reviewed.

Theoretical review of hegemony

Hegemony is the exercise of power based on dominance and leadership by a group over other groups. This power is not always enacted through direct coercion but often through indirect and subconscious means (Kaiser, 1990),
resulting in "... the imposition of norms, practices, beliefs, and values that reinforce the interests of the upper stratum" (Scupin, 1992, p. 201).

The introduction of Africans into the U.S. involved a hegemonic system of control between white slave owners and black slaves. African Americans as descendants of African slaves have been subjected to the legacy of slavery and the ideology that created and maintained its existence in the U.S. Some scholars argue that this legacy remains active. A review of this literature and opposing viewpoints is covered later.

Pettigrew (1980) provides an overview of the racial oppression and racial beliefs about African Americans from the 1600’s to the 1980’s. The “dominant beliefs” about African slaves in the U.S. and descendants of those slaves has ranged from slaves as “uncivilized heathens” needing their masters’ protection from the 1600’s to the 1800’s, to claims of “black inferiority” endorsed by scientific research from 1914 to 1941, to perceptions that “blacks inferior status is largely attributable to blacks themselves, especially their lack of motivation” (Pettigrew, 1980, xviii) from 1968 to 1980’s.

Other scholars, have looked exclusively at black men and their experience in U. S. society. Early perspectives of black manhood are situated in a model of cultural pathology stemming from a history of slavery, oppression, and disenfranchisement (Frazier, 1939). In this model, the black family allegedly was absent of an adult black male and composed of powerful black women. Young black males failed to learn the nuances of manhood because of this family structure (Frazier, 1939). White male imagery of manhood demands a distancing
from femininity (Kimmel, 1994). Later scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s suggested that black men did align themselves with mainstream values about manhood, but were stymied in the enactment of the male role by institutional racism (Hunter & Davis, 1994). Interestingly, the label “man” was not extended to black males until the late 1960s during the civil-rights movement, suggesting that violence, a “mainstay male trait”, was required to gain this recognition (Franklin, 1994).

In sum, African American men have been depicted as “uncivilized heathens” (Pettigrew, 1980, xviii), “rampaging sexual beasts” (Kimmel, 1994, p. 135), “a step above the animals - possessing awesome physical power but lacking in intellectual ability” (Marable, 1994, p. 71), and more recently as “delinquents, criminals, . . . [and] drug and alcohol users” (Gordon, 1994, p. x).

Gordon (1994) is one scholar who has called for research that presents a more balanced perspective of the black male. What is absent according to Hunter and Davis (1994) is an examination of various “. . . adaptive meanings of manhood that may have grown out of the Black experience. . . and their potential divergence from the traditional White masculinity model” (p. 22 - 23). Many scholars have begun to address this deficit by exploring “gender role conflict” among African American males (Harris, Torres, & Allender, 1994; Wade, 1994); “hidden voices of black men” (Hunter & Davis, 1994); and the “quality and nature of Black men’s interactions with each other” (Roberts, 1994, p. 380). These studies revealed that African American men’s views of manhood
integrated flexibility with a strong mind and included having dignity (Hunter & Davis, 1994).

In an extended study of previous research examining African American males identification with mainstream male role norms, Wade (1994) argued that the psychological strain caused by identifying with dominant male roles could be a result of an externally defined racial identity. Wade suggested that black men who embraced a bicultural and pluralistic perspective may experience less gender role conflict (Wade, 1994). Furthermore, Roberts (1994) forwarded that black males’ perspectives of manhood may be influenced by the African tradition of combining male and female roles.

What this literature suggests for the current study is that hegemony and racism have served to perpetuate a negative image of black men for more than two hundred years. African American men have been subscribers of mainstream male role norms in spite of the barriers present that prevented them from fully participating in U.S. society. What is also suggested by the research is that African American men may have alternative views of manhood that incorporate a bicultural and pluralistic perspective, as well a more global incorporation of male and female roles. These alternative views can help black men minimize gender role conflict.

Gender is often a lens used to examine the phenomenon of hegemony in U.S. society. This area of study is usually attended to by feminists, but is receiving scrutiny from researchers examining how hegemonic masculinity affects males.
Hegemonic masculinity is one manifestation of manhood present in U.S. society since the 1830s that emerged as a companion to our capitalist marketplace (Kimmel, 1994). Kimmel (1994) theorized that the quest by men to achieve manhood results in hegemonic masculinity which effectively maintains men's real-life power over women, as well as the power that some men exercise over other men. The bedrock of hegemonic masculinity lies in its “exclusion of others”, (e.g., women and nonwhite men) according to Kimmel (1994).

In order for white men to maintain their positions of dominance, exercise power, and enjoy the privilege they derive from their position, they must engage in gatekeeping (Lorber, 1994). Gatekeeping ensures that newcomers will be as homogeneous as possible to those at the top so that the status quo is maintained (Lorber, 1994). This literature suggests that the hegemonic practices may prevail despite the best efforts of “others” to conform to the codes and norms established by dominants.

For African American males in predominately white business settings, their reasons for conforming to the organization’s dress code may differ from their white male counterpart’s. Dress may be a form of resistance for men against the hegemonic system that did not acknowledged them as men until the 1960s. Adherence to mainstream cultural norms and value systems may seen asinine for African American men because of their negative experience in U.S. culture. On the other hand, as African Americans, they have membership in both the African American culture and the mainstream culture. The men may
be socialized to believe in the same values and hold similar meaning for symbols as their white counterparts.

Hegemony in action

The effectiveness of the Civil Rights Acts of the 1950s and 1960s and the Affirmative Action policies enacted to redress past gender and racial discrimination practices involving housing, voting and hiring have been debated by many scholars. William Julius Wilson (1980) is one scholar who believed that the changes brought about by the political, social and economic activities of the second half of the twentieth century resulted in a substantial dismantling of many of the traditional racial barriers that African Americans experienced. Economic position became a more salient factor in determining the life chances of individual blacks versus the "day-to-day encounters with whites" (Wilson, 1980, p. 1). Class, rather than race, has a more salient role in controlling and restricting groups of people (Wilson, 1980).

An opposing viewpoint argued by Massaquoi (1996) asserts that African Americans are faced with a "new wave of racism" (p. 56). Numerous anecdotes chronicle incidents where day-to-day interactions in public spaces with whites are perceived by blacks as laced with racial prejudice resulting in discrimination (Feagin, 1991; Massaquoi, 1996). These incidents range from blacks not receiving service at restaurants, to assumptions that a black person in a business setting is the subordinate, to multiple stops of a black man by the same group of police
officers within a few minutes in a contained blocked-off. Omi and Winant (1994) argued that:

The legacy of the past - of conquest, slavery, racial dictatorship, and exclusion - may no longer weight like a nightmare on the brain of the living, but it still lingers like a hangover or a sleepless night that has left us badly out of sorts. Without question, there has been significant progress toward racial democracy in the years since 1965, yet it is implausible to believe that racism is a thing of the past. (p. 157)

Specific to the workplace, Cose (1993) interviewed "middle-class blacks" to understand why seemingly successful people were bitter about their professional experience. Cose (1993) found that many of these black executives perceived they had not professionally progressed at the same rate as their white counterparts notwithstanding similar efforts and academic credentials. For some of the interviewees, anger was not solely caused by a lack of monetary compensation or professional advancements commensurate with their efforts and tenure, but their rage also "... has to do with being totally and capriciously stripped of status at a moment's notice" (Cose, 1993, p. 34). Acknowledging that some African Americans have made great strides professionally, Cose (1993) concluded that racism still exists in corporate settings and affects blacks in these positions professionally and psychologically.

For African American males in managerial and executive positions, the symbolism of business dress serves to identify them in their professional role and may also be used as a hedge against inappropriate harassment. A. Barry Rand, a black executive vice-president with Xerox believed that "no matter how successful [African Americans] are, ... in greater society, if you don't
have your corporate card with your title on it, and you’re not dressed up with
your suit and tie, you can be treated as many black people are - very badly” (Lesly,
1993, p. 77). For some African American males, business dress may be more than
a uniform, it may serve as armor.

Aesthetics of African American culture

Style permeates every aspect of Black life, from how one is born to how
one is buried, and everything in between. It is embodied in greetings,
dancing, and talking, praying, swinging, walking, dressing, and playing,
thereby make most Afro-Americans artistic and aesthetic performers in
the theatre of life. Style demands that even the most mundane and
routine things be injected with a flair or presentation that causes them to
radiate vitality and finesse. (Gay, 1987, p. 9)

In examining the aesthetics of African American culture, resistance to
hegemony, traces of Africa, and mainstream culture are all prevalent.
Africanisms - “elements of culture found in the New World that are traceable to
an African origin” (Holloway, 1990, p. ix) are found in many areas of African
American culture. Several scholars maintain that African culture had a
“collective consciousness or ethos” that connected them with nature, God, and
each other (O’Neal, 1994). hooks (1990) theorized that the African slaves brought
with them an aesthetic conceptualized as a collective effort, integrated fully in
everyday activities, and focused on community development and survival.
hooks (1990) argued that this aesthetic concept from Africa serves as the basis for
African American aesthetics.

O’Neal (1994) noted that African American culture highly admired
improvisations, focusing more on how an adornment is worn rather than what
is worn. Similarly, personal expressiveness was identified as a valuable behavior in the African American community (O'Neal, 1994). The often heard stereotype that African Americans prefer wearing “loud” colors has not been agreed upon or corroborated by researchers. However, O'Neal noted that some African Americans may avoid wearing “high affect” colors as they climb the socioeconomic ladder. Wooten (1995) found preliminary evidence to indicate that stereotypical behavior is avoided by ethnics when they are a numerical minority in a situation. African American males may avoid wearing “loud” colors in professional setting because it is a stereotypical expectation; wearing loud colors may not be their personal preference, and adherence to company dress codes may be a more convincing influence.

Hall (1992) speculated that white and black male college students may differ in their expression of ‘style’ in dress. Hall (1992) concluded that black males were encouraged in their black subculture to experiment with “different combinations of accouterments”. Furthermore, black men were encouraged to enjoy being the subject of gaze because of their visual presentation of self.

The widespread belief in U.S. society is that men and women differ in their manner of dress. As evidenced by this recent article in *Men’s Health*:

> When it comes to style, the difference between men and women is bolder than the check on a houndstooth blazer. She dresses to look beautiful. You [men] dress not to make a mistake. (Rubenstein, 1995, p.102)

Men are encouraged in this article to learn how to ‘dress right’ or to incorporate imagination or style; a matter of practice that any man can perfect (Rubenstein,
Furthermore, Rubenstein (1995) stated that the development of style in dressing “makes you comfortable [and] makes you happy” (p. 102).

African American men may be more adept at styling because of the social feedback they receive (Hall, 1992). Clothing expenditure is twenty to thirty percent higher in African American households than in comparable white households (Kerr, 1990). According to Schwartz as quoted in Kerr (1990), “... clothing has been one of the few avenues of conspicuous consumption open to blacks and other economically disadvantaged minorities whose inability to compete for other restricted-consumption status symbols has been compensated for by increased clothing consumption” (p. 96). African American men may have more practice shopping for clothing and putting together a wardrobe.

Styling also has a political use for African American men. Hall (1992) stated that “style, for some [emphasis added] African Americans, is a distinctive, collective voice of resistance to oppression and domination” (p. 3). Hall (1992) traced the historical presence of dress in Black culture to demonstrate how it has been used to exercise individual control and express creativity. As an example, Hall (1992) theorized that bondspeople in eighteenth-century New England practiced forms of resistance by “displaying their flair for the aesthetic” which resulted in increased self-esteem, and gave “them the chance to forge a community through their desire to impress and outdress one another” (p. 6).

Styling has also been found to be a form of resistance in African American culture today. Majors and Billson’s (1992) study of young black males examines the “cool pose” strategy used as a form of resistance and defense against a
“restrictive society”. Cool pose is a “ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 4). One dimension of cool pose is the ability to style. “Clothes are a portable and creative expression of styling” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 80). Young black males engage in competitive displays of their creativity through dress. Furthermore, styling “paint[s] a self-portrait in colorful, vivid strokes that makes the black male ‘somebody’” (p. 84). Holloman (1989) found preliminary evidence to indicate that black men with low self-esteem may rely more on dress to gain approval from others.

Cool pose is one strategy that can be employed in the black community by males in any socioeconomic class (Majors & Billson, 1992). There are several functions of this coping strategy. First, it is a form of resistance still useful for African American males in coping with a restrictive society. Second, dress occupies a firm position as a symbol of pride and means of acquiring self-esteem in the black community. Third, creative presentations of self are acknowledged and encouraged by others in the black community.

African American male managers and executives, despite having a narrow and well-defined dress code, may have the opportunity to display style. What the literature reveals is that style is both a concrete and abstract behavior. Style involves the engineering of a wardrobe and the attitude adopted when wearing it. African American men as numerical minorities in corporate offices may use style to individualize their wardrobe without breaking the dress code.
Stylish adherence to the dress code (i.e., doing the code well) may bolster their self-esteem.

**Conformity**

Kanter's (1977) case study of a multinational organization provides excellent insight into how social conformity was perceived as beneficial in mitigating uncertainty that surrounded the managerial role. According to Thompson (1967) bureaucratic uncertainty had three identifiable sources: an incomplete understanding of cause and effect which limit contingency planning; the impact of forces outside the organization; and the unpredictability of human nature even within the organization. Kanter (1977) argued that the uncertainty phenomenon was a universal condition of large organizations, increasing with rank of employee, despite the growth in numbers of management experts and increased routinization and institutionalization of activities.

Uncertainty required that managers exercise personal discretion in their decision making activities. However, the exercise of personal discretion raised concerns in the business organization about loyalty, commitment and trust and whether decisions were made using a shared value system (Kanter, 1977). Homogeneity was perceived as assurance that managers characteristically involved in non-routinized tasks would make decisions that mirrored the values of the business organization.

To achieve homogeneity, managers could be hired that had either similar social background and characteristics or comparable organizational experience (Kanter, 1977). Kanter (1977) noted that homogeneity achieved through comparable organizational experience was possible under specific conditions:
only when the organization or its models are no longer new - when organizational routines have been established and people have remained in their positions long enough to make shared socialization and shared experience a meaningful basis for trust. (p. 50)

From the early 1900s to mid-1900s, similarity of social background and characteristics was prevalent among the business leaders. So much so, that Moore (1962) referred to the corporation as an arrangement based on “homosexual reproduction” (p. 109) because of the predominance of white males in managerial roles.

Social homogeneity helped to lessen concerns about trust, as well as increased peer acceptance and ease of communication among the managers (Kanter, 1977). It was believed that talking to someone with a similar background and shared experiences reduced the need to explain subtle meanings or nuances, thereby allowing more time to be devoted to the task (Kanter, 1977). In contrast, people who displayed inconsistent behavior or “looked different” were avoided by incumbent managers for fear that this difference or inconsistency signaled a difference in understanding, communication, and values (Kanter, 1977).

Within these businesses, the organizational culture comprised of “those values, beliefs, and knowledge acquired through social interaction which serve to define and predict acceptable organizational behavior” (Elsass & Veiga, 1994, p. 433) was well established and contained the business dress code for white collar, professional workers.

The “uniform” of the white collar worker was one that had evolved from the suiting introduced by King Charles II in the 1660s. The three-piece business suit of the 1660s, consisting of a “shirt, cravat, coat, long vest, and breeches, all in simple, dark, and plain fabrics” (McBride, 1996, p. 43), was transformed into a
dark wool suit, white or solid colored, long-sleeved cotton shirt with a solid, dark colored silk tie worn by managers or executives in the 1900s.

Joseph and Alex (1972) contended that a uniform symbolically communicated that an individual had identified with the organization’s norms and standardized roles and had acquired the necessary skills and values of the group. Moreover, Rafaeli & Pratt (1993) suggested that uniformity of dress signaled that individual differences were suppressed in the interest of the group.

In sum, conformity has been a requisite behavior for managers. Homogeneity (physical and social) was an early strategy employed to increase the likelihood that managers would make decisions based on the values and norms of business organizations. One visual conformity cue was adherence by individual managers to a tacitly understood dress code. New employees learn what the company's dress code is from fellow employees, mentors, or by personally monitoring their environment. Dress for success and management development seminars strongly urged new executives to monitor their appearance so to reflect the culture of their organizations (Cameron, 1989; Lesly, 1993; Russell, 1992). Kanter (1977) found that social conformity was so strongly encouraged for managers that differences in appearance could warrant a complaint about their inappropriate appearance to higher management.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the white male exclusivity in managerial and executive positions in U. S. businesses was challenged by the passage of the Civil Rights Acts designed to provide qualified individuals access to full employment. In 1983, women in executive, administrative, and managerial positions were 32.4% of the total, whereas blacks were 4.7% of the total in public and private institutions (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1994). Percentages reported in 1993, listed women as occupying 42% of the above positions and black men occupying 3% of
the positions, and blacks as a total occupying 6.2% of the positions (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1994). Because blacks comprise 12.1 percent of the U.S. population, their percentage in the executive, administrative, and managerial ranks is still far from parity with the group's total population.

Studies focused on women in management report that business dress choices for these women are not so clear cut and well-defined as they are for their male counterparts (Kimle & Damhorst, 1997; Johnson, Crutsinger & Workman, 1994). Current research shows that women's professional appearance must include an appropriate amount of masculine and feminine cues; however, there is not a definitive formula for the correct combination of gender cues that must be displayed. Women interviewed by Kimle and Damhorst (1997) believed that for career advancement conformity was a professional priority. For some of the women conformity meant being "seen as similar to men" (Kimle & Damhorst, 1997, p. 17), but not completely similar. Hence, according to Kimle and Damhorst (1997) the dilemma occurred of how "a business woman must choose appearance forms which exhibit seemingly opposite categories simultaneously" (p.13); namely, conservatism vs. fashion; conformity vs. creativity; masculinity vs. femininity and sexuality.

Thus, gender is a characteristic that makes women immediately distinguishable in executive ranks from the numerical majority - white males. Because of this "difference", women may feel the need to attend more to their appearance so that they communicate conformity to the company's values and goals. However, business women have moved from the dress strategy of mimicking male business "uniforms" in the '70s and early '80s (Solomon & Douglas, 1985) to a more varied and self-defined image in the '90s (Kimle & Damhorst, 1997). It is not clear if this strategy is serving career women well -
moving them up through the ranks - or if it contributes to their containment below the glass ceiling (Damhorst & Fiore, 1993; Wolf, 1991) due to the emphasis of difference from male leadership. However, women tend to see their involvement in appearance as a strategy of agency and proactivity (Kimle & Damhorst, 1997).

**Process of stereotyping**

Stereotypes are defined as "... unreliable generalizations about all members of a group that do not take into account individual differences within the group" (Schaefer, 1990, p. 27). Stereotypes can produce deleterious effects when they are broadly applied by people in power to subgroups because the dominant group exercises the prerogative to define society's value of the group (Schaefer, 1990).

Kanter (1977) described the few women in managerial positions at the multinational organization she examined as "tokens". These women were subjected to close scrutiny, had high visibility, and seen as representative of their gender. Mistakes made by the women were communicated quickly and widely throughout the organization. Therefore, the women "bent over backwards not to exhibit any characteristics that would reinforce stereotypes" (Kanter, 1977, p. 237).

Kanter (1977) hypothesized that it was women's rarity and scarcity, rather than their gender that "shaped the environment for women" (p. 207) in the organization. Similar to women, African American males have physical traits
(skin tone, hair and facial features) and cultural backgrounds that differentiate them from the majority business executive (white male). Literature reviewed in earlier sections reveal that African Americans receive treatment in business organizations similar to that received by the women described by Kanter.

Challenging Kanter’s analysis of the saliency of numbers influencing women’s experiences in the workplace, Acker (1990) argued that gender was at the crux of inequity and stereotyping in the organizational structure. Kimmel (1994) asserted that gender and ethnicity were markers that “white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men” (p. 124) used to distinguish themselves from “others”.

In recognition of this “difference” from the numerical majority, African Americans entering the executive and managerial levels of business are urged by veteran African American executives and career development specialists to conform to the dress codes of their organizations because their appearances as well as other behaviors are "held to a higher level of scrutiny than [that of] their white counterparts" (Russell, 1992, p.78). Molloy (1988) advised men to adopt the style of dress worn by the “top men” in the field or in the company. To African Americans, Molloy (1988) added the caveat that they should “dress more conservatively, but also more expensively than their white counterparts if they wanted to have an equal impact” (p. 233) because of the legacy of racism and the assumption that African Americans are less competent than their white counterparts.
African American male executives and managers' style of dress and involvement in appearance is influenced by the normative dress codes established by white male executives and managers, but may also be shaped by reactions to hegemonic masculinity. One purpose of the current study was to examine if the dress code of mainstream businesses differed from African Americans' concept of business dress, and if so, was there a tension created by these differences.

First impression formation

Burns and Lennon (1993) defined first impression as “the initial judgments made about another person based upon observable characteristics and behaviors as well as inferences made about the person's personality, behavior, and characteristics” (p. 9). These impressions can be formed as quickly as 30 seconds (Hayes, 1996) and are used by the perceivers to answer the question “who is this person?” (Bassett, 1979, p. 285).

Scholars have found that dress is a cue perceivers used in forming first impressions (Davis, 1984; Douty, 1963). Studies by Lambert (1972) and Giles and Chavasse (1975) illuminated how style of dress could effect the impressions formed by perceivers. As an example, confederates dressed in a well-groomed versus "hippie" manner obtained better cooperation (Lambert, 1972). More written comments were received from confederates dressed in smartly dressed clothing than when dressed in low-status outfits (Giles & Chavasse, 1975). Moreover, similarity of dress can be an influential factor in the attraction
between two people and serve as a preliminary filter at “early stages of relationships” (Buckley, 1983, p. 32).

Forming first impressions may be crucial for African American business men who regularly have chance or planned meetings with new clients or customers. Attendance to appearance may be one way that African American business men can counteract possible stereotypical images of them held by a potential client or customer who has not interacted extensively with this subgroup.

In Littrell and Berger's (1984-1985) study of counselors and police officers, there was disparity in the type of comments used to describe the neatly groomed male adolescent client versus the same boy in less neat and messy looking conditions. A less neat client was given closer scrutiny and specific remarks "about the condition of his garments, his grooming, and other aspects of his [clothing]" (Littrell & Berger, 1984-1985, p. 52). Littrell and Berger (1984-1985) posited that behavior "contrary to social norms" may be of more import in forming a more detailed first impression. Behavior or physical characteristics different from the expected norm seem to command more attention.

African American men are highly visible in some corporate settings because of their scarcity and rarity in numbers relative to white males. As a result, they may be subject to close scrutiny as the women in Kanter's (1977) study experienced. Presently a well-groomed image may be of greater concern to this group if they are subject to unwanted attention.

Other studies have investigated "the role of clothing in extended inferences" (Workman & Johnson, 1989). Appropriately dressed (e.g., collared white shirt, dark slacks and shoes) taxicab drivers not only generated positive inferences about the driver's personality characteristics and abilities, but also
effected positive assumptions about the associated city. Similarly, Rafaeli and Pratt (1993) proposed that outsiders' image of an organization can be shaped by the employees’ dress.

For African American business men, positive first impression formation may be more challenging and crucial to establish because of preconceived negative images of this subgroup. Therefore, attention to appearance would become paramount so that first meetings, whether planned or unplanned, resulted in impressions that were consistent with the perceivers expectations of credible, competent and approachable business men. As a representative of their organizations, these business men would also be mindful of the image they project about their company.

Dramaturgy and role theory

Dramaturgical role theory is a way of looking at behavior between or among people using theatrical concepts (Swensen, 1973). Goffman (1959) explained that performances or role taking involved acting in ways that observers will believe the actor possesses certain attributes. Through the use of mutually understood cues, the actor can convince the audience of his or her performance.

Dress has been a significant prop used by people to “take on a role”. Effective role taking involves assuming the demands of the role. Earlier literature reviewed revealed that attention to appearance was an expectation in professional environments. Therefore, it may be hypothesized that dress is an essential prop necessary to satisfy the role expectations of the perceiver in a business settings. Individuals wearing a business suit have been associated with managerial roles (Damhorst 1984-1985).
Additionally, dress helps the wearer engage in and execute roles. Dress can make one role more salient than other roles that individual holds (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). The donning of business dress can be effective in "calling up role feelings and affecting how [individuals] . . . as role performers related to others" (Rafaeli et al., 1997, p. 10).

African American men are only 3% of the total number of managers, administrators and executives in the U.S. Due to their rarity in those roles, they may rely more heavily on the symbolic association of a suit to identify their role. Wearing business dress may also help African American men feel more professional than when they are wearing casual dress, as responses from others are more likely to be shaped by expectations for the business or administrative role rather than by other characteristics of the men.

Casual Day Dress

The current practice in most business organizations where employees don casual dress on one or more workdays parallels historical dress trends whereby "... styles originally designed for active sport frequently 'metamorphosed' into business wear and then into formal evening wear" (Farrell-Beck et al., 1996, p. 22). The number of companies participating in casual day practices increased from two out of three in 1992 to nine out of 10 companies in 1994 ("Dressing in America", 1995; Farrell-Beck et al., 1996). Furthermore, casual clothing is worn full time in one-third of all U.S. companies (Farrell-Beck et al., 1996).

Casual day was reportedly started as an employee perk by computer companies trying to inspire creativity (Abend, 1995). Along with creativity, casual day is believed, by some employers and employees, to improve morale and thus increase productivity (Abend, 1995; Christopher, 1995) at no expense to
the employer (Corwin, 1995; Heller, 1995; Leonard, 1994). Others believe that “... if you’re comfortable, you can think better” (Corwin, 1995), suggesting that traditional business attire is constraining or “... leave[s] free spirits little room to manoeuvre” (Donaldson, 1988). Some workers find that wearing casual dress reduces their dry cleaning bills, and therefore saves them money (Leonard, 1994, p. 56).

Communication within the company is touted by some employers as improving when casual dress is worn because the status symbols associated with the traditional business dress that may prevent communication between “higher and lower paid employees” are removed (Hendricks, 1996; Verespej, 1994). Some employees, however, see permission to wear casual dress as compensation for the long hours they work and the feeling of insecurity they have about their job (Christopher, 1995).

In addition to the speculations about the benefits of casual dress days in the workplace is a hypothesis that casual dress reflects the informal American culture (Hendricks, 1996) and “is consistent with the changes in lifestyle and social values of the aging Baby Boom generation” (Longo, 1995, p. 15). Casual dress may signal a new way of operating by enabling companies to move away from the formal hierarchical organization mentality (Corwin, 1995).

Not all businesses enthusiastically adopt the casual day practice; one executive stated that their “... firm isn’t really joining the movement toward casual dress - the movement is coming toward us” (Fortune et al., 1995, p. 42). Furthermore, casual dress is limited, in some businesses, to areas where contact with customers is unlikely (Hendricks, 1996). Many businesses perceive that the closer they match the dress of their customers, the more effective they will be in building rapport (Hendricks, 1996). For these companies, the traditional suit is
worn when interacting with clients or at major meetings (Fortune et al., 1995; Hendricks, 1996). For other companies that extensively use contemporary communications technology without ever or rarely seeing the customer, casual dress is adopted on a full-time basis (Henricks, 1996).

The introduction of casual dress in the workplace generated anxieties and involved extra expenses for some workers. One question often asked by employees was - what constitutes appropriate casual dress in the workplace (Christopher, 1995)? Levi Strauss was one company that came to the rescue and presented companies with suitable options for casual day attire (Farrell-Beck et al., 1996). Casual dress for the workplace is still not clearly coded, as exemplified in comparison of one writer who offers “how to dress” advice for casual dress and suggested that a must-have is a denim or chambray shirt (Heller, 1995, p. 88); another fashion adviser cautioned against this by saying that wearing a denim shirt violates a casual-Friday commandment because “everyone and his monkey has one” (Omelianuk, 1995, p. 61). Some workers did not have suitable attire when casual day dress was introduced in their workplace; therefore, they purchased additional clothing to wear to work on casual dress days (Humphries, 1995; Laabs, 1995).

Those that disdain the practice altogether believe casual dress causes workers to relax and not act in a businesslike manner (Falconi, 1996; Heller, 1995). Falconi (1996) believed that image communicated by casual dress is not one of pride in self or in the company; casual dress does not convey success. Other critics of casual dress have characterized it as a reflection of the “degeneration of the overall culture” (Farrell-Beck et al., 1996, p. 23).

The findings in a study of Midwestern professional women revealed that they perceived “an inherent risk in relaxing the standards of business dress ...
[because they could] be seen as less professional or businesslike on casual day” (Farrell-Beck et al., 1996, p. 24). Dressing too provocative, too dressy, or too extreme in any way (Heller, 1995) is another danger for women in the workplace who wear casual dress.

More interesting is the fear that “feminization in the workplace” (Farrell-Beck et al., 1996, p. 23) can occur if casual dress is worn in work environments. Casual dress has been linked to decreased self-control and increased expressiveness in appearance which are antithetical to the “business status quo”. However expressiveness has been “... linked with historically patriarchal views of women as lower in status and power” (Farrell-Beck et al., 1996, p. 23). Casual dress not only allows for more expressiveness in dress, but also serves as an egalitarian tool for workers. “Conversely, if individuals with varying degrees of authority are dressed differently, the hierarchical structure is emphasized” (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993, p. 42).

It remains to be seen if wearing casual dress is detrimental to certain groups (i.e., women and non-white males). The symbolism associated with traditional business attire includes an image of a successful, competent worker. Minority workers (i.e., women and non-white males) may not benefit from wearing casual dress if the image they project degrades their credibility.
METHOD

An interview schedule was developed and in-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions to capture the informants' "... perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 77).

Instrument

Literature that examined professional male dress and/or business dress of ethnic minorities helped to shape the interview questions. In addition, the researcher engaged in preliminary informal talks with male acquaintances to ascertain important issues considered during the purchase, daily selection and coordination of their business attire.

Interview schedule

The interview schedule included seven areas that covered: 1) background information related to the informants' previous residence, past employment and current position; 2) typical workday and usual apparel worn; 3) shopping habits; 4) company dress code; 5) perception of business dress in general and specific to self; 6) opinions about future businesswear trends; and 7) general demographic information (See Appendix D).

Background questions in section one were used to establish rapport with the informants. Also, this information was useful in understanding how past geographical and professional experiences contributed to the informants' present business wardrobe choices.

Questions regarding a typical day were designed to provide information about the informants' varied business interactions both inside and outside of
their "home offices". These questions helped to establish how much and how often the informants were in situations where they encountered strangers. One scholar posits that the potential for racial discrimination is greater when a minority is away from his home or work environment (Feagin, 1991). As all of the informants in this study were African Americans, the researcher was interested in learning if possible encounters with strangers influenced the dress behavior of this group.

Portis (1966) suggested that African Americans used clothing to express their socioeconomic status because they were hindered from purchasing other consumer products. Campanelli (1991) reported that African American middle-class consumers had a higher awareness of fashion than their white socioeconomic counterparts and spent 22% more on appearance related goods than the general population. Questions in section three were incorporated to explore the consumer behavior and fashion awareness of this group of black consumers.

Section four questions examined issues of conformity to co-workers and occupational peers. Informants were asked to comment on how they compared their dress to their white counterparts. African American males are urged by many veteran African American executives and career development specialists to conform to the dress codes of their organizations because their appearance as well as other behaviors may be "... held to a higher level of scrutiny than [that of] their white counterparts" (Russell, 1992, p. 78). Additionally, these questions helped the researcher understand how information about appropriate business dress was disseminated within their organizations.

Section five asked the informants to convey their general opinions about business dress; namely, what characteristics did they associate with the wearer of
professional attire. The informants were then asked to comment if they felt that others associated these characteristics with them when they were attired in their business clothing. Anecdotal comments from African American business men indicated that the assumptions of status and acts of deference made to white men in similar settings were not always made to them (Cose, 1993).

Section six asked the informants to comment on trends in business dress they have observed at their workplace and in society at large, and their prognosis for these to continue.

Section seven demographic questions were incorporated as a means of gauging the influence of education, age and marital status on the clothing choices of this group of men.

Each informant was queried about their professional dress using the interview schedule as a guide. In accordance with the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the researcher was open to adding or reformulating questions if important topics emerged during early interviews. Questions that repeatedly elicited a negative reaction from the informants during the early interviews were eliminated. As an example, respondents were incredulous when asked: "Do you ever wear your suit jacket with a different pair of slacks?" The unanimous answer was "no!", as if the researcher had asked something so obvious that the question was absurd.

Procedure

Sampling and informant contact

A snowball technique was used to identify African American males employed as executives, managers, professionals, or administrators in Des
Moines, Iowa, for this study. The first two interviews were with acquaintances of the researcher. These men supplied names of other potential interviewees who, at the end of each interview session, were asked to provide names of other men that met the employment and ethnic criteria. Two female associates of the researcher also contributed names of possible informants. The researcher used names of informants as referrals whenever granted permission.

A letter of introduction (see Appendix B) was mailed to men identified as potential participants. The letter included the name of the person who referred them, purpose of the study, and a warning that they would be contacted by telephone to see if they would participate in the study. The telephone calls were made one week after mailing the letters. During the telephone conversations, questions about the study were answered and a mutually convenient appointment was made if the respondent agreed to participate. All except one of the men reached by telephone consented to participate.

The proposed number of informants for the study was between 10 - 20. A total of 15 interviews were conducted because the informants' responses became redundant.

**Interview conduct**

Fifteen men were interviewed for this study. Twelve interviews were conducted at the informants' place of business, two at the informants' home, and one at a public library. Prior to the start of the interview, each man was asked to read and sign the Human Subjects Consent Form (See Appendix A) advising them of their right to refuse to answer any question and/or stop the interview at any time. All of the interviews were tape-recorded after asking the informants' consent. Most interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to one hour and
fifteen minutes. However, one interview was approximately twenty-five minutes because the informant had scheduled a conflicting appointment.

**Researcher**

As a "human instrument" in the study, the researcher was able to respond in an immediate manner to the informants' comments. The interview format with semi-structured questions enabled the researcher to pursue topics of interest introduced by the informants. Furthermore, the majority of men (75%) were strangers to the researcher prior to the interviews. The semi-structured format permitted flexible control of the sessions to move back and forth between the informant and the researcher, thus helping both parties feel more comfortable and build rapport through personal exchange. Informants were made to feel that their input was valuable and that they could take the discussion in directions they felt were important.

The subject of race or ethnicity is not always a comfortable topic to discuss. Because the informants and the researcher were of the same ethnicity, dialogue focusing on ethnic issues were discussed freely and easily. Perhaps ethnic similarity allowed the informants to be more candid in their comments than if they were interviewed by someone of a different ethnicity. As an African American, the researcher was mindful of her personal perspective on issues of ethnicity and attempted to tailor questions so as not to "lead" the informants.

However, the researcher and the informants were of different genders, and occasionally questions were asked that exemplified this difference.
Interview agenda

The intent of the researcher was to build rapport through conversation about the informants' previous residence, past employment, and current work duties and responsibilities; she then moved to questions about the informants' usual business attire and shopping habits. As the researcher and informants' mutual comfort level increased, more probing questions were posed such as, "How does your dress compare with your co-workers?" Questions about informants' ethnicity and how they perceived its impact on their dress followed. Each informant was asked to comment on areas of interest or importance to them that the researcher had not touched upon. Demographic questions were asked last.

The questions were ordered flexibly. Often, the informants would introduce a topic out of order, and the researcher would explore the topic before moving back to skipped areas. The men were given unlimited time to discuss each area of importance to them. Many of the men related past experiences involving their appearance that gave meaning to their current dress practices.

Data Analysis

The Strauss and Corbin (1990) constant comparative method of data analysis was adopted in this study. Initial coding of the transcripts involved searching areas of dialogue for basic concepts. These units were marked on the transcripts, and the researcher recorded impressions and initial thoughts on meanings in the margin. Constant comparisons of these units across transcripts was made. The second reading helped to reveal "similarities and differences" across the transcripts and to organize and develop categories later incorporated in a coding guide.
The researcher's interpretations of informant responses is the basis for the coding guide. To verify the dependability of these interpretations, an independent coder was employed to apply the coding guide to the raw data. During the coder's training session, the study was explained and the coding guide reviewed. The coder reviewed one transcript and then met with the researcher. The coder, researcher and a third researcher familiar with the study worked together to make changes to the guide such as condensing areas by eliminating redundancies and adding categories. The coder and researcher continued to meet after other transcripts were coded for review and negotiation of interpretations. Continuous changes were made to the coding guide until a mutual agreement of interpretation between the coder and researcher was reached.

The intercoder reliability score was computed using a formula where the numerator is derived by multiplying the number of coders by the number of agreements, then dividing this product by the total number of judgments made by the coders. The first score was computed after three interviews were coded and it was 65%. The second and final score was taken after coding six transcripts and yielded an intercoder reliability score of 87%.

The final coding guide (Appendix E) was used by the researcher to isolate themes in the study.
FINDINGS

The findings from this study are thematically organized for analysis. Work identity and ethnic identity emerged as two overarching themes in informants' descriptions of their business dress. Subsumed under the two major themes are aesthetics, conformity, and involvement issues that further explain why the informants made certain clothing choices.

A demographic profile introduces the informants in the descriptive section. The interpretative section is subdivided using the overarching themes of work identity and ethnic identity.

Descriptive Results

Informants

Fifteen African American males employed in executive/middle-management positions in business and administration were interviewed for this study. Three of the men were self-employed. The others held positions as public school administrators, data or credit analysists, human resource directors, legal coordinators, sales or facilities' managers, attorney, government investigative agent, and insurance agent. Of the self-employed men, one was an attorney, and two were entrepreneurs in non-traditional ventures. The definition used in this study for an entrepreneur is "... one who organizes, manages, and assumes the risks of a business or enterprise" (Mish, 1994, p. 387).
All of the men, with the exception of two, worked in Des Moines, Iowa. The other two men worked in nearby cities less than 35 miles away. Iowa was not the native state for 87% of the men, and the average time of residence for these non-natives in Iowa was nine years. African Americans in the state of Iowa are slightly less than 2% of the population and in Des Moines are just under 5% of the population (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1994).

Mean age was 45 and ranged from 34 to 60 years. All of the men had college degrees except one. There were eight advanced degrees among the men: two law degrees, one Ph.D., and five Master's degrees. Fourteen of the fifteen men were married; one was divorced.

During each interview the men were asked to describe their jobs and how often they interacted with the public in that job. From this information, the researcher ranked the men's public involvement using three nominal categories of high, medium or low. Men who regularly attended meetings outside their office or routinely received visitors were given a high ranking. Nine (60%) of the men in this study held positions that required frequent public involvement. Two (13%) of the men were analysts and communicated with their clients/customers via telephone and computer. As they had very little personal contact with the public, they were classified as low on the public involvement ranking. Medium rankings were given to the four men (27%) who met intermittently with people outside their office. Two of the men rated medium were owners/operators of their own businesses. As CEOs or presidents, the men developed business plans, solicited business, and helped in the production of
their products. See Table 1 for a listing of informants, their job positions, and their level of public involvement.

Table 1. Informants' occupants and level of public involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Informant Occupation</th>
<th>Public Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Alex</td>
<td>Insurance Agent</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bernard</td>
<td>Credit Analyst</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Chris</td>
<td>Sales Analyst</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. David</td>
<td>Sales Agent</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Earl</td>
<td>Facility Manager</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Fred</td>
<td>Attorney</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. George</td>
<td>Legal Coordinator</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Harvey</td>
<td>School Administrator</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Isaac</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. John</td>
<td>School Administrator</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Ken</td>
<td>Credit Analyst</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Larry</td>
<td>Director of Human Resources</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Mitchell</td>
<td>Director of Human Resources</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Norris</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Otis</td>
<td>Government Agent</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interpretative Results

One purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how ethnicity influenced the informants' choice of work attire. To that end, specific statements made by the informants regarding their ethnicity have been partitioned out from other statements that globally explain the informants' professional identity.
Because work identity and ethnic identity were often interrelated, even inextricably entwined at times, an absolute subdivision of the findings and analysis into these two categories was not possible. Work identity and ethnic identity most often acted in tandem as they influenced the business clothing choices of the informants; however, the researcher has noted when they were in opposition. Consequently, the discussion of work identity and ethnic identity in their respective subdivisions is not exclusive of the other.

**Work identity**

The informants' perceptions of the symbolism of male business attire in U.S. society begins this section. Next issues of conformity and aesthetics are explored through discussions about the normative male professional dress in Iowa reported by the men, as well as the men's personal business dress styles. Regular business attire and casual dress days are examined through ethnicity and conformity lenses. Lastly, the informants' thoughts on the importance of their dress outside their home office, along with a discussion of how and why they altered their dress for different business environments are explored.

**Symbolism of appearance**

As previously discussed, the traditional male somber-colored suit, because of its consistent use by men engaging in business and administrative activities, has certain meanings assigned to it in U.S. society. However, the practice of wearing this "uniform" in business settings and the meanings associated with it
have evolved for the most part within a white male culture. African American males as "others" have had limited participation in executive and managerial business environments. Moreover, certain groups (e.g., women, African Americans, and other non-white groups) have occupied a subordinate position relative to white males in U.S. society and have been subjected to a hegemonic system where white males have had a patriarchal influence over their lives. The African American men participating in this study are members of a numerical minority ethnic group within U.S. businesses as well as in society in general. They were asked to discuss what the traditional male business suit symbolized to them.

It symbolizes professionalism, it symbolizes pride. (Chris/3)

If you [are] looking good, you [have] got pride in yourself. It takes time to get yourself together. (Bernard/2)

Well, I think that when a person is dressed it is an indication that person has a pretty high self-esteem. That person also, I think exercises discipline. I think it is something that is demonstrated when that person is dressed. It also indicates that a person has a sense of responsibility. (Harvey/8)

I think it symbolizes success. I think it symbolizes confidence. I think it says that this person feels good about himself and feels good about what he is about and what the school is about, or what the position is about. (John/10)

As a symbol, the suit signaled to the informants that the wearer could possess positive traits of pride, self-esteem, confidence, honesty and could be characterized as professional, successful, responsible and disciplined. Research

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1 The names are fictitious, used for identification purposes only.
has found that wearers of male business suits can be perceived as competent vis-à-vis less formally dressed individuals (Bassett, 1979; Damhorst, 1984-1985).

Furthermore, self-completion theory predicts that individuals will use symbolic objects to help them perform in a role (Solomon, 1983). The informants believed in the symbolic power of the male business suit to identify them as professionals. They believed that the suit could assist them in assuming their professional roles.

Alex, however, was adamant that the image of a person dressed in a business suit not be construed to mean that the individual was more professional (meaning competent, credible, or successful) than other workers. Alex believed that the "suit does not make one more of a professional or more successful than someone who does not wear a suit". In answer to the question if there was a symbolism people automatically associate with the suit, he replied:

Yea, that the person is not sweating doing his work. That is all you can assume. That's all one should assume [emphasis added]. And he or she is not necessarily outside and getting exposed to dirt or in most cases not even perspiring. (Alex/1)

Alex's comment may have been generated by the fact that the majority of white collar workers traditionally have been white males in U.S. society, whereas African Americans and other non-white groups have typically been employed as blue collar workers. Moreover, this system of labor distribution coincides with the hierarchical ranking of non-whites as subordinate to white males. A perception that white collar workers (white males) are superior to blue collar
workers (nonwhite groups) could be formed because of the dominant position that white males have in this society.

As an African American, Alex's comment could be interpreted as his conscious effort to not devalue the work of blue collar workers relative to his white collar position. Furthermore, Alex's "standpoint" as an African American could provide him with the insight to understand how position of privilege or domination are maintained in a society (Frankenberg, 1995).

The belief by all the informants that the business suit could identify them as white collar workers parallels the mainstream association of it with managerial and executive positions. Additionally, as discussed earlier, advice given at dress for success seminars and from veteran white collar workers is the importance of wearing appropriate attire in the workplace because dress is a powerful communication tool. Many of the African American men in this study expressed that they relied heavily upon the symbolism of the suit to identify them as bonafide members of corporate America. As will be discussed later, the suit served to combat instances of stereotyping and circumvented situations where they may be denied access because of their ethnicity.

**Normal work attire**

The men were asked to described what they regularly wore to work. Eighty percent wore either a suit or sports jacket and tie to work on a daily basis. However, three men wore only suits to work. The other three informants (20%) wore casual clothing to work on a regular basis, i.e., open-necked shirts, either
plaid wovens or knitted sports, with dockers or khaki pants. Two of these casually clad informants (Isaac and Norris) were owners/operators of their own businesses. As CEOs or presidents, they performed a myriad of activities, ranging from administrative duties to production work. A good amount of their time was spent in the office preparing reports, proposals, and performing tasks that would otherwise be delegated to other workers in a larger firm. Mitchell, the third informant who regularly wore casual clothing to work was employed at an agricultural seed company. His dress was reflective of the clients that he and his co-workers interacted with most - production plant workers and casually clad farmers.

All of the men, with the exception of two entrepreneurs, classified their core wardrobe as conservative. Chris, a sales analyst, made a comment that captured how all the men defined conservative:

I don't think that a double-breasted suit is conservative. I think that is a little more upscale, keeping with the times in a sense. . . . Conservative is typically a single-breasted suit, in my opinion, and either blue, gray, you know, some color that is not really overbearing or flashy. Conservative is typically a white or blue shirt and somewhat of a basic tie, black socks, no color in the socks or anything like that, other than black or blue, and also possibly a shoe that typically ties-up instead of a slip-on. (3)

A conservatively dressed man has been described as wanting "... to communicate that he is trustworthy and stable... [and is] more concerned about being appropriately dressed than [he is] with making a bold fashion statement... [furthermore],... [he] never wants his choices to cause any undue attention" (Boswell, 1993, p. 181). Boswell's description of conservative attire is similar to the informants' descriptions.
The characteristics associated with conservative dress offered by Boswell suggests that a person who is dressed in ostentatious style could be assessed as untrustworthy or unstable. To avoid this negative perception, dress should be understated and uniform so that the focus is not taken away from business activities. All of the men in this study acknowledged that dress could shift attention if it exceeded the boundaries of what was expected attire for the business situation:

I try to, well you can understand that I would not want to get up there (appear in court) with a red tie and a suit that is going to attract too much attention. You don’t want to attract too much attention. You want to fit in there and be neat, clean and a certain atmosphere is created by that. And I am sure that has an affect on some jurors. One extreme or the other would certainly affect them. (Fred/6)

I don’t think that if I were sitting in a room with eight people, I wouldn't want my suit to draw attention or my clothes to draw attention away from the larger group. I would want to blend in with the larger group. I wouldn't want my suit to be the focal point to the meeting. And that is not to say that a person can’t be eloquently dressed, there is a difference. (George/7)

The majority of men maintained a conservative style of dress, but sparingly incorporated “flashy” items such as braces, cuff links, and monograms into their professional wardrobe.

... you have to dress for your audience, and at the same time dress within [your] personality. And I'm not a flashy type person anyway, so it doesn't bother me to work with conservative people cause I'm basically a conservative person anyway. But there are some suits I have that are a little more flashy than what I perceive some people want to see, so I don't wear those suits on certain days. If I'm going to certain meetings with certain people, and I know who they are and I know what their likes and dislikes are, I wear something that is comfortable to them as well as comfortable to myself. (Earl/5)
Dress codes

Of the fifteen men interviewed for this study, only 4 (27%) of their companies had written dress codes. Fred, the lawyer, had a written dress code imposed by the courts for courtroom attorneys. Another informant (Otis) worked as an investigative agent for the U. S. government; his agency had a dress code, but he had not read it. Otis believed he knew what was acceptable dress from past employment experiences and by merely observing his supervisors and co-workers. David, a sales manager for a communications company was required to wear business attire, which meant to him a shirt, tie and suit coat. George, the fourth informant who worked for a company with a written dress code explained it this way:

We have a written dress code. Even our casual days, there are certain standards for acceptable casual dress, and that is written. But when you get to my level, I don't think, our dress code does not say that every male in the company must wear a tie. That is not in the dress code. In the dress code it doesn't say that professional male employees must wear a tie; that is not in the dress code. It says business attire. So whatever is appropriate business attire. For my job, business attire is just assumed to be a shirt and a tie. (7)

Even though these informants had written guidelines for attire, they still relied on personal interpretation to know what was appropriate to their position with respect to degree of formality. In addition to monitoring co-workers and supervisors' attire for clues, the men also paid attention to comments received from others about their dress.

For the other 11 men in the study, comments such as, "... they don't have anything written hard and fast" (Bernard/2), were common. To further explain the absence of a written dress code Chris dubbed its tacit understanding as a "no brainer" (3). Chris believed that in a business setting it was a "given" that he would wear a suit or sports coat and tie to work.
Despite the general absence of written dress codes, all of the men declared they were aware of their company's expectation for appropriate dress and gathered this knowledge from two sources. One source was observations of co-workers' and supervisors' business attire, and the other was from experience and knowledge they accumulated in former employment positions. The men demonstrated an understanding of their companies' expectation for business dress by statements such as:

They like everyone in the office to dress professional. (Chris/3)

But it wasn't communicated, . . . you kinda just know how you are expected to dress. (Earl/5)

Harvey, a public school administrator's comment summarizes how this tacit knowledge was acquired by him:

It is really not a dress code, but the expectation is that we are going to wear a coat and tie here. . . . It was a standard that I was accustomed to anyway when I arrived. But it is always nice to know that the person that is the CEO has a pretty high standard and pretty much expects people that work with him to have that same standard. (8)

The above comments indicated that the informants were cognizant of their companies' dress codes through direct (written) or indirect (observed) communication. Moreover, these comments suggested that the informants had an awareness of the organizational culture of their businesses and businesses in general in the U.S., as well as how dress was used to reflect and maintain that culture.
Professional role

The suit or sports coat and tie were recognized as the "uniform" typically worn in professional settings by the informants. All of the men believed certain situations required this attire (i.e., major meetings or planned first meetings with clients/customers). As a uniform, this attire helped the men establish themselves as professionals; several informants even said being a professional required them to dress like a professional. Using a suit to establish identity is consistent with Joseph and Alex's (1972) assertion that "the uniform identifies group members" (p. 719) and establishes role or position in a group.

I just feel that if you are going to be a professional educator then you ought to dress appropriately, and for me the appropriate dress would be a coat and a tie. (Harvey/8)

The dress of course is related to what I plan to do. If I plan to visit with people, then I have a role. I'm in a role, and in that role I put on a certain uniform. (Alex/1)

... it is the type thing I may have to always, say look the part, that seems so tacky, but I have to always, I never know when my clients might see me and when I'm out at the mall or at a restaurant, I have to always [look the part], because they have this image of me, perception of me. So you want to keep that particular image, if you want to keep that rapport, keep that relationship in all cases [you have to look the part]. (David/4)

Harvey's, Alex's, and David's comments revealed an awareness that appropriate business dress was not only an expectation but a requirement for them in their professional roles, and thus could be seen as an uniform.

Kanter's (1977) case study revealed that employers tend to seek employees who are "the right sort of person" or "their kind" (p. 48) to insure loyalty, acceptance of authority, and conformity to a prescribed pattern of behavior. By actively scanning the business environment for appropriate dress cues and
engaging in the normative dress practices of their businesses/professions, the men demonstrated a willingness to conform to the prescribed dress code.

**Iowa adaptation**

Because the majority of the men (87%) had relocated to Iowa, they often discussed their business attire by comparing it to dress practices they had participated in or observed in other areas of the U.S. Many of the men described the normative male business dress in Iowa as conservative, and as discussed earlier, a number of the men described their style of dress in this manner.

Chris' comment illustrated how his dress reflected his business environment when he answered the question if he felt the need to pay more attention to his dress because he was an African American:

> Personally, I've never thought about it. I know there might be some that do. I do feel that you do want to dress somewhat conservative, you don't want to be too flashy. But that has always been me. I've never wanted to be flashy, but I've never wanted to be "plain Jane" either, and I didn't want to blend in like everybody else as well. I wanted to wear my hair short because I wanted to wear my hair short, and I like the way all the facial hair looked off versus being on. A lot of it was a lot of personal preference. It just so happen that a lot of my personal preferences just so happen[s] to have a good blend with what a lot of people want in corporate America. That is just me. (3)

Mitchell provided this critique of his style of dress:

> I am not a clothes horse. So I will probably be fairly conservative. It will be a gray, dark blue, or a dark brown [suit that I wear]. It will be a single-breasted, not a lot of fancy design. I am kind of the 'blend in' sort of guy. (13)

These two comments indicated that the men viewed their business dress as comparable to what is worn in most professional settings. Chris' personal preference for conservative dress conveniently mirrored the normative dress of
corporate America. Mitchell classified his style of dress as conservative by default since he was not heavily involved in clothing.

Both of these men's statements suggest that uniformity of dress can be an effective means of standardizing the visual images of wearers. In the state of Iowa, the African American population is less than 2% of the total, and in the city where the majority of men worked it is slightly less than 5%. Furthermore, the informants in this study often worked or interacted in environments where they were the only black person or one of a few. As a result of this scarcity of African Americans, the men often perceived themselves as highly visible.

I happen to be a relatively tall African American male and that sends signals. And I am always aware of who I am and where I am and what I am doing. And I am aware that in most cases, and this is unfortunate and I am not really proud about it, but I am aware that in most cases I will usually be the only African American in a room. (Larry /12)

Well it is six o'clock and you still see me with my tie on. You still see me fully uniformed for the most part... Even when you are on your way home and you are stopping by the grocery store... you [are] still conscious that you are still being viewed. You are still being assessed. Simply because where we are now, you don't blend in as easily... So I'm going to be, if I sneeze it will probably be noticed; at least in my mind I think so. (Alex /1)

The perception of high visibility led some of the men to believe they were subjected to extraordinary scrutiny. As a result, they deemed it necessary to maintain a professional appearance, even after normal work hours, in certain places where they could potentially encounter their customers/clients.

Maintenance of a professional appearance may be more important to these men because as African Americans business men, they sensed that their professional image was so fragile and fleeting as to be altered or damaged by an act as simple as dressing down in grocery stores or shopping malls.
I guess I am influenced by my environment. Even though I can't help it, I am probably taller than 90% of the people in this state and I am African American, so I am less than 2% of the population. I am trying to blend in, I guess (laughs). I am trying to fit into my environment. Although that is probably impossible to do, without even realizing it I am trying to fit in. (Otis/15)

Wooten (1995) posited that "numerical minorities" may be more concerned about sticking out rather than fitting in. Fitting in suggests that the person is unconditionally adopting the standards of the group. Sticking out correlates more with crossing the cultural boundaries of what is acceptable or normative dress, and by so doing exposes the wearer as ignorant or a rebel. Several men remarked that they were neither rebels, nor absolutely conforming to a standard, but dressed within the range of normative dress practiced in their particular workplaces.

Since moving to Iowa, some of the men had adjusted the color and style of their business dress. Responding to a question about his preference for business attire, David stated:

Just your traditional white, blue, yellow shirts. I get into the colors, stripes sometimes, more of the traditional because I'm in the Midwest. I found that people dress more traditional and the things I wear are more traditional than if I was in a larger market. Because when you deal with agriculture and the different businesses I work with my dress has to be reflective of who I'm going to see and where I'm at. (4)

Otis remarked about the style change he made since moving to Iowa:

Most of the guys, well nobody in the office wears a double-breasted. . . . I had a couple of double-breasted suits that I wore [when I started here]. . . . When I started out, the guy that hired me was. . . a black guy and he wore double-breasted suits. I guess he influenced me and I wore them (double-breasted suits) for a while and then he retired probably a year later, and he wasn't around anymore, and there are older guys in the office that don't wear double-breasted suits. And generally people I deal with when I
leave the office don't wear double-breasted suits, I guess. I just don't wear them. I like them. I think I look good in them. In fact I think I look better in them than the single-breasted suit because I am so tall and thin, I think I look good in them. But I guess I just don't wear them. (15)

George who moved from the East Coast explained his professional dress evolution this way:

My dress was very important to me probably 14 years ago, it is less important to me[now]. . . . I stayed up with the styles [then]. (7)

When asked why the change, George elaborated:

I think here is a little different than living in New York City. Being around blacks, or a large number of blacks, that has a lot to do with it. (7)

Many of the informants relocated from large metropolitan cities (i.e., Kansas City, Chicago, New York), and they sensed that some changes to their business wardrobe were necessary to reflect the more conservative environment they perceived in Iowa. The cultural influences that supported or encouraged a more trendy style of business dress were not present in their Iowa workplaces. Trendy is used here to describe any deviations to the traditional business dress (e.g., colored, striped or French cuff shirt, colorful tie, patterned socks, double-breasted suit, etc.) that may be fashionable at the time.

A larger and more diverse population can explain some of the dress differences the informants perceived, because larger cities offered greater variety in shopping, increased opportunities to see men wearing fashionable business dress, and provided a supportive climate for a more involved male clothing consumer. As noted by Larry, both black and white males in his former locations engaged in a high level of fashion monitoring and involvement in business dress purchase behaviors.

I'll give you a classic from New York and San Francisco to use a colloquialism 'Everybody ragged' [dressed well]. I don't care who you
were. Guys fell in there [dressed well]. . . [Larry comments to himself].
God I got to get some more money [laughs]. 'This boy is bad' [compliment to wearer]. (12)

Furthermore, it seems evident that the presence of a sizable African American population affected the level of involvement that some of the men had in more fashionable styles of business dress.

In contrast, to the majority of informants, Norris, an entrepreneur, voiced a different assessment of his style of dress in Iowa:

I absolutely despise corporate uniforms. . . , and I don't like anything that is conservative. You go out and stand on Court Avenue at lunch time and you see hundreds of them (business men), and they are all dressed exactly alike. They have those dull looking blue blazers and tan pants and Hush Puppies shoes. (14)

As an entrepreneur, Norris was not under the influence of a corporate business dress code. He was the CEO of his company, a risk taker, and as such was able to display more flamboyant dress than the other 13 informants. However, Norris felt that his dress, while less restrictive, should reflect a professional style.

. . . folks that I usually talk with have a dark suit on and a white shirt and lately here, it has been a red or blue tie or something like that. I don't try to copy them, because I have a certain amount of independence, I'm an entrepreneur. I need to impress, but not necessarily by the clothing that I'm wearing. I need to look like I fit into the scope. (9)

The minority dilemma

Many informants contended a double-standard existed in the business world, one for white males and a second for minorities (blacks and women). The informants perceived that white males were assumed to possess essential skills and traits for work in corporate environments, while blacks and women were assumed to be deficient in these areas. Thus, the men felt that blacks and women
had to prove they were qualified for their positions, but white males had to
perform poorly before they were considered unqualified.

Appropriate business attire, the informants believed, identified them as
professional and by so doing helped them overcome this deficit.

I think black folks as a rule, especially black males, are under
tremendous psychological pressure to look good, to perform well. And
they pay particular attention to those kinds of things, like how they
dress, what kind of car they drive, what kind of watch they wear, all of
that is important . . . . It is because they come in the workforce with
[people having] a negative, a negative impression [of them] a lot of
times. People have a negative impression of them so they have to do
something to make up for that. So if the rule is to dress well, then they
will dress super well. (Isaac/9)

. . . I think probably if there is one thing that I would say relative to black
males that want to succeed in the business environment, I think it is
important that they dress according to the position that they have or
dress higher, if they expect to get that kind of respect. If they come in
looking less than the environment that they are working in, I think
that they will be treated less than the position that they hold. . . . I know
that it happens for white males, but they can recover. I don't think
black males can recover as quickly as white males. Just on the basis of the
natural assumption [that] . . . you got here for some other reason than your
skills. So you are always in this 'prove mode' and then if you have things
that distract from that 'prove mode', you really push yourself down the
wrong path. (Mitchell/13)

Other informants responded to the question of how important their
appearance was to them as black men.

I think it is very important, very important. Because I think we are the
ones who have to overcome a lot of obstacles and a lot of hurdles, and we
don't want to leave anything to chance. (John/10)

. . . you feel good when you know that you are dressed right. It makes
you feel confident, and all that runs together. And I think being black it is
extra important. But obviously if you are going in and talk to some
guy about a million dollar contract, you can't look like some hick from the
sticks. And if you are black, you have a double duty because he is
suspicious of you in the first place. You have to look like a winner. (Norris/14)

Attribution and stereotyping theories discussed by Feldman and Hilterman (1977) are helpful guides in understanding why the informants felt any mistake or "negatively evaluated behavior" could be seen as confirming negative stereotypes held of African Americans. Inappropriate dress could be viewed as a "negative behavior", thus providing evidence of the informants' lack of knowledge about the prevailing business dress code and corporate culture. Because the informants believed their recovery from mistakes would not be as quick or complete as their white male counterparts' recoupment, they felt compelled to avoid errors of any kind.

The informants' work identity and ethnic identity acted in tandem in directing the men towards the same objective - presentation of a professional appearance similar to the dress prevalent among other professional males in their work environments. Ethnicity was an additional and equally powerful influence for the informants in their normal business dress.

**Casual dress**

A number of informants were employers or employees at businesses that practiced dress down/casual day, similar to a trend that in 1995 was practiced at 70% of major U.S. corporations (Longo, 1995) or by 90% of U.S. workers ("Dressing in America", 1995). Only five (33%) of the men in this study wore items they considered casual clothing to work. Three of the informants were previously described. The fourth informant's work as a data analyst did not require him to interface with the public. On Fridays, his company sanctioned casual dress for employees. The fifth informant was an investigative agent who regularly worked outside of his home office. Casual dress was sometimes a more
effective mode of dress for him. As defined earlier, casual attire included open-necked shirts, either plaid wovens or knitted sports, with dockers or khaki pants. Nine (60%) of the informants wore a more dressy "corporate casual" attire, which included a blazer or sports coat with a tie and slacks on designated casual days or when the informants selected.

Earl, a facilities manager; however, explained he always wore a suit because as manager he was ultimately responsible for operations at that location. His job involved a high level of involvement with the public at his office location, as well as the possibility for impromptu meetings away from his office.

. . . you may not plan to go out of the office that particular day, but sometimes you get called out and you may have to go, and one should dress appropriately at all times. (5)

Similarly, the men who wore corporate casual dress also sensed the need to be dressed professionally at all times in the event of a chance meeting with a client/customer. Furthermore, casual dress was not adopted on a limited or regular basis by all companies that the informants interacted with and could create dissonance during business meetings.

I think it is kind of cumbersome, particularly when you are dealing with external customers, and if they are not necessarily involved or accustomed to casual dress, then it puts you in an awkward situation. I know that I have had luncheon meetings and taken people, my guests, to our executive dining room and there were people walking around with blue jeans on. So it is kind of awkward in some instances because I don't think everyone appreciates the nature of it. (George/7)

Some of the informants maintained that their executive or managerial roles required them to "look in charge" at all times. Casual attire did not identify them in that capacity.

I will not go into a plant location, I say, wearing jeans and a sweat shirt, but I will go in a very casual way, but not to that extent. [I] still want to be
in a place [style of dress] so that I am not confused with the people working in the plant. (Mitchell/13)

As discussed earlier, the majority of African American men have been employed historically as blue collar workers. For black men who are employed in white collar positions, they may want to avoid being mistaken for manual laborers by dressing in attire that is too casual.

Popular literature is replete with articles debating the merits of casual dress. One opinion is "... if you look sharp, you're more likely to act sharp" (Falconi, 1996, p.13). A contrasting point of view is that formal dress, (i.e., traditional business suit) "impedes communication" (Verespej, 1994, p. 9). Some of the informants felt that dress that is too casual could affect their sense of professionalism or productivity.

I think that if you are in business you should dress professional everyday, but that is my own personal opinion. ... I don't feel that I'm at work a lot of times if I'm not dressed professional. (Chris/3)

Well, I rather have a shirt and tie on for the week. Now one day casual is fine. It doesn't affect my work, but image-wise you project a better image [when you wear a shirt and tie]. (Bernard/2)

You know when you wear a suit and tie, ... versus dressing with a casual shirt and pair of jeans, I think people do respond to you more so. In fact I know that people will respond to you more readily or quickly when you wear a suit and tie. (Otis/15)

The informants' comments suggest they viewed clothing as context-dependent, as Davis (1985) noted. Different situations required different styles of dress. Some informants felt less than professional on the days they wore casual clothing and felt they were sometimes treated differently than when they wore the traditional business attire.
Several of the men believed that casual dressing at work was a fleeting trend. Alex explained that dress is part of the professional package that consumers expect.

It won't last. It is a trend. The dress down, it won't last. The consumer, and we all in this world are trying to make contact with a consumer. A consumer expects certain standards. A consumer is going to expect certain levels that are uniform. A consumer expects certain consistencies, some predictability. If you get to the point that you lost that, then you are going to lose the [consumer's confidence] because along with that product comes the person who serves and represents that product. (1)

However, George was involved in diversity training at his company. He believed that as businesses became more tolerant of diversity in their environment, their attitudes about what is appropriate for business dress would change also.

I can see how even some dress standards may be even more relaxed in years to come if we continue to move in this direction that I see us going in the company.... Our company, represents the good old Midwestern value, hard work, very conservative, very traditional in thinking, everybody in the company looked the same, even the black folks were an exception to the rule. That is very different now. In the last three years we have seen the racial composition, the ethnic composition of our company change. (7)

For the majority of these men, casual dress was not viewed as a welcomed escape from the traditional dress code of the business environment. Wearing casual clothing, albeit corporate casual, affected the men's feeling of professionalism and could influence how they were perceived by others. The possibility of a negative perception from others was a major reason why some of the men declined to wear casual dress. As one African American scholar asserted, "the same rules that apply to whites do not apply to African Americans in U.S. society" (G. O'Neal, personal communication, August, 2 1996). O'Neal's
conclusion may be an explanation as to why these men did not feel comfortable dressing too casually at work.

A few of the men remarked that their white co-workers dressed more casually than they did.

A lot of them [white males] like to be casual everyday... When they go on trips, they typically go somewhere and go casual. They might not have a shirt and tie on when they go into a dealership, but that's them. I'm the only one that is me. So I look at it totally different. Business is business, I don't take it casually or lightly. You have to treat it as business. (Bernard/2)

Casual dress may be seen by some African American males as a rule or dress code practiced in white corporate America, but it does not apply to them. Ethnic identity was a more powerful influence for the men when they were confronted with issues related to casual dress at work. As Larry stated:

I do know that I truly believe that people of color and women are held to a different standard. And I never forget that, and that could be probably more my paranoia/neurosis than truth. It doesn't matter, it is my perception... No, I would never come in here on a work day with an open collar, and I don't care who else would do it. (12)

First impression

Since 87% of the men in this study were employed in positions that required them to interact with the public either on a regular or frequent basis, the possibility for them to meet individuals or groups on a first-time basis was high. Many of the men commented it was imperative for them to make first impressions positive. Dress and overall appearance were believed to influence the first impression of the perceiver(s), establish the tone for the ensuing interaction, and suggest that the wearer was competent.
So if your first contact with me is visual, and I have to open the dialogue, because our service is created and generated through dialogue, then how do we best position ourselves to have a successful dialogue? (Alex/1)

Because when you are calling on clients, that first impression is very important. So if you dress like you are successful, people want to do business with someone who is already successful. (David/4)

I stress to teachers that the first impression is a lasting impression. Let's not come to school looking tacky or tattered, because parents come in and they look at you and they are going to see you looking tacky or tattered, and they are going to think your instructional level or your teaching skills will be likewise. (John/10)

The belief in the power of dress to contribute to a positive first impression, caused some of the men to chance error on the side of being overdressed for meetings.

... the first impression is most time the best impression and the lasting impression. So if you go somewhere, ... I would rather overdress than underdress. (Bernard/2)

Appropriate dress was seen by the men as a helpful entrée into unfamiliar settings because it signaled their professional role. These comments are consistent with the Rafaeli et al. (1997) findings that dress "establish[es] both status and rapport with others" (p. 37). Similarly, Buckley's (1983) research suggests clothing might stimulate attraction (i.e., friendship and liking) towards a stranger at early stages of a relationship.

Dress and appearance were useful in making favorable first impressions, but only seen as temporary tools by the men to create a comfortable setting and identify them as business men.

Your first contact, of course, is visual and once you open your mouth then the visual is gone, and it is all about the substance that you bring. (Alex/1)

As African Americans working in a community with a small black population, a number of the informants felt it was necessary for them to make
positive first impressions to dispel any misinformed stereotypes the perceiver may hold. One stereotype Earl wanted to address was the expectation that he might dress inappropriately for business activities by wearing loud colors or flashy attire.

Because when you are going into a lot of these places, some people probably expect me to wear a purple suit [laughs], or sometimes that is in the back of my mind. Although, I know it’s not me anyway. But, this is a small community and a lot of people haven’t seen African Americans. (5)

Reeder & Drake (1980) found that black athletes chose less attention-getting clothing than what white students expected them to wear. As stated earlier, researchers have not reached a consensus on whether African Americans prefer to wear “loud” colors and clothing. Many of the men commented they did not wear clothing they considered loud or flashy because it was not their personal preference for business wear and was not appropriate for professional settings.

Park (1986) defines an impression as a collection of knowledge one person has about another. This knowledge can be gathered from real life experience with the person or by way of inferences generated from other sources. In the state of Iowa, it is more likely that white residents' information about African Americans is from a media source or hearsay versus actual interactions with blacks. Therefore, the importance of making a favorable first impression may be greater for African Americans than for their white co-workers, as African Americans are highly attuned to the dangers of media-based stereotypes.

All of the men felt it was necessary to project a positive first impression and would wear a suit and tie to major business meetings. However, there was a marked difference in attitude about attire between two of the entrepreneurs and the other 13 informants. These two entrepreneurs used dress to demonstrate
their independence, top executive position, and risk-taking spirit rather than 
esprit de corps. Norris stated:

If I was going to a big business meeting, I would definitely wear a
double-breasted [suit] if I could with some loud [emphasis added] not
loud, but, well loud, bright accessories - tie, pocket square or something
like that. (14)

Issac, the second entrepreneur, wore the somber colored suit to major
business meetings, but with a short sleeve white shirt because it symbolized
freedom from corporate structure and communicated his work commitment.

That's one part of me that I don't feel boxed in and it gives me that
work ethic feeling, that I came to work. I didn't come to be a peacock, I
came to perform. So if I have to take the jacket off, I want to look like
I'm ready to go, and I also appreciate that in someone else. (9)

Other informants commented that short sleeve shirts were not
appropriate business attire. One informant associated short sleeve shirts with
blue-collar positions:

And short sleeve shirts, ah this is not a factory. We don't work at a
factory. And I do equate short sleeve shirts [with] work at a factory.
(Bernard/2)

Short-sleeve shirts may be gaining more acceptance in the workplace because of
the incorporation of casual dress in the workplace ("No seasonal cutoff", 1983).
However, the majority of African American men in this study did not wear
short-sleeve shirts with their suits or sports coats.

Adaptive dressing

The informants were well aware of the expected business wear for their
immediate office area; however, because a number of men interacted outside this
space, they also used self-monitoring techniques to gauge the appropriate attire
expected for other business contexts. Their daily clothing selection was varied to conform to role expectations in myriad situations (Kwon, 1987). Alex explained:

You are really dealing with, you are dealing with all walks of people, and in one sense you have to be medium road. (1)

The adaptations were adjustments in style, color, or type of garment worn. Changes to style might involve not wearing a double-breasted suit or suspenders to visit a conservative client. Color changes were perceived as necessary by the lawyer when he went to court or by the other men when they attended major meetings either in their company or at other businesses.

... if I am going to try a case I will usually wear a dark suit. I don't know why, but jurors sometimes and too frequently they put something together and say 'Well this guy looks good, or he looks honest'. You can leave a favorable or unfavorable [impression] because of your dress, has nothing to do with the case. (Fred/6)

... if there is a big meeting or something comes up, yes I'm going to try to make sure that I have the right thing on. You know, maybe a darker suit as opposed to a light colored suit. (Bernard/2)

It just depends, it depends on where I'm going and in some instances, I try to wear a dark suit, not to make it ultrally conservative. I serve on several boards. A lot of individuals I serve with, you know, you want to be able to dress so that you are not flashy, if you will. So when I go to big boy meeting, I usually wear a dark suit, a dark blue one or a dark brown and something not flashy. (John/10)

The above comments suggested that the informant believed that particular dress had specific meaning to perceivers. Fred could use certain dress to persuade members of the jury that he was honest, and therefore what he said about his client must be truthful. Bernard and John recognized the importance of activities at major meetings and used dark/somber colors to signal their corresponding serious-mindedness. All three of the informants' comments
indicated that they understood how a change in context or activity could warrant a change in their dress so that they match the expectations of their audience.

Even though suits or sports coats and ties were the norm for most of the business activities the informants engaged in, sometimes these items could be a deterrent to positive interactions with their clients/customers or employees. Moreover, all of the informants believed they should mirror the dress of the people they were interacting with. As David stated: "Dress like your customers so they can feel comfortable with you" (4).

Consequently, the men would wear clothing other than the traditional suit/sports coat and tie ensemble to certain places because they perceived their business uniform generating resentment or animosity in certain environments.

... if I'm going out to a plant location, I will definitely 'dress down' to fit into the environment. I may go as far as wearing jeans, a sweater, to just kinda be a part of the environment, as opposed to 'the suits from Des Moines are here, we're in trouble'. . . . So again, it's being sure to match your environment and your position. (Mitchell/13)

When I have a very important presentation or something like that, I'll wear a suit, because it speaks to the occasion, . . . and sometimes wearing a suit makes folks uncomfortable. . . . [I noticed during my work] in the projects (low income housing), where I might interact a lot with the community, [that] suits just turn folks off a lot of times because [the suit] . . . represents something . . . .Whether that representation is accurate or not, it just represents authority sometimes or other than what people would want represented, I found out. (Isaac/9)

Isaac regularly interacted with an African American community and believed wearing a suit and tie to a meeting with them was viewed negatively.

I don't care how genuine your interests are in a situation that might be prevailing there, folks discredit that simply because you look like you dressed for the [white] man's force, and you can't be about what is happening in the neighborhood. (9)
Joseph and Alex (1972) contend "the effect of the uniform depends therefore upon the relative degree of prestige accorded its group" (p. 720). The above comments suggest that business wear can be associated with mainstream authority which may intimidate or disaffect some groups. Alex (1969) found that the shared ethnicity of black police officers and black community members was not sufficient to overcome the hated symbolism of "white power" manifested by the police uniform. Similarly, business suits may hold some symbolism of white hegemonic power for some African Americans.

Employees at the plant location visited by Mitchell automatically equated a visit from an executive dressed in the official 'uniform' as a sign of trouble. The African American community where Isaac interacted viewed his suit and tie as a symbol of white establishment, and therefore his commitment to their needs as false. Consequently, the symbolism associated with business dress can be negative or positive depending on the perceiver and the situation. Understanding that their business suits could evoke negative feelings from certain groups of people they visited, the informants would alter their attire when needed.

. . . I think that I have that kinda sensitivity to know what folks need to feel comfortable with an individual, so no matter what my personal habits are when I'm in a situation where I'm trying to develop that level of comfort with a individual, I try to understand what I should wear in that environment. . . . If I'm in Rome, I do what the Romans do. (Isaac/9)

The adaptive behavior of the informants is consistent with symbolic interaction theory. Blumer (1969) states actors interpret a situation, and may "... abandon an intention or purpose, revise it, check or suspend it, intensify it, or replace it. . ." (p. 8) in order to align themselves with others. During prior interactions with customers/clients or through conversations with co-workers,
the informants became aware that their regular business dress did not project the most effective image for all occasions. By assuming the perspective of their customers/clients or "role taking", the informants understood what changes to their regular business dress were necessary so that they created a "comfortable" atmosphere for a variety of business activities. These revisions include wearing a darker colored suit to major meetings, as well as donning less formal dress for meetings with casually clad customers/clients.

Other reasons for deviations to the basic style worn were offered by the informants. Mood, a temporal (or situational) factor posited by Kwon (1987) as a daily clothing selection influence was mentioned by the informants.

Mitchell, who was employed at the production branch of an agricultural company where casual/relaxed dress was adopted for everyday, illustrated how mood influenced his attire:

If I feel like I want to wear a sports coat and slacks, I'll do that. If I want to wear the dockers arrangement with a sports shirt, I'll do that. (13)

Similarly, Chris described how clothing could affect his mood:

I just kinda wear things that I like, that make me feel good, have something to do with maybe brighten up my day at times. (3)

These comments indicated that different clothing options were used by the men to satisfy personal needs or wants; dress could also provide an emotional or psychologically "comfortable" state for them.

Other informants talked about incorporating different items in their daily wardrobe as a way of having fun or communicating specific messages to others:

I just have some fun. Sometime I get some wild crazy suspenders sometimes. Something really strange. It's just little fun things. I call them fun things. I'm not trying to be rebellious, just fun stuff and see what kind of response I get. (David/4)
Sometimes I want to show a little dash, a little braggadocio. (Larry/12)

Both of these informants were aware that these types of deviations in their dress would be noticed. The first informant did not intend for his “fun things” to be perceived as a form of resistance, but as a whimsical interruption in the normal conservative style. However, the second informant’s comment suggested that he was consciously engaging in attention-getting behavior that was self-promoting.

Seldom did the men talk about weather or environmental conditions as a determinate in their daily selection. Because the majority of the men's workday was spent indoors in a climatically controlled environment, weather may not be a major consideration beyond seasonal adjustments.

A few of the men remarked how weight change, especially gain, effected how many of the suits and shirts in their wardrobe they could wear. Increase in weight was attributed to aging by the men over 40 and to overeating by the men 40 and under.

Involvement in dress

Previous comments by the informants indicated that they viewed their professional dress or the “uniform” as a requirement for their business activities. Beyond the utilitarian purpose of dress, comments from some of the informants described the aesthetic pleasure they derived when wearing their professional dress.

If you have a decent physique, I like the way that the double breasted is cut. It gives you a nice lean physique. Ah, I just like the control of it as well, 'cause it wraps you up and you feel, it makes me feel more, I guess, sophisticated. (Norris/14)
The men kept abreast of new business fashions through magazines, TV and trips to retail stores. Oftentimes, the men would people-watch on their various trips out of town. A few of the men commented that they had a clothing 'wish list', and that they would obtain these items when they were financially able:

I just like clothes. I don't have all of it. But at least I know what is there, and so, ok, here are the choices that I have, that I would like to have, and when I can afford it, this is what I will buy. (Bernard/2)

I don't have a huge wardrobe, but I have several really nice expensive suits. But if I had the money, then I would have a whole bunch of them. But I've got to put money into, I've got 3 kids, and I've got to put money into trying to develop this business, and that is my first priority right now. (Norris/14)

Interest in clothing for these two men extended beyond acquiring an adequate wardrobe for their business needs. Both men were actively engaged in monitoring current trends and mentally noted what items they would acquire in the future.

Some of the men regularly shopped:

I'm a very good shopper. I shop sales. I'll buy something even if I don't need it, just because the price is right. (Chris/3)

Shopping for George was once a past-time:

You know I would go shopping and looking in windows, but I don't do that anymore. I haven't done that in a long time. [It was] 10 years [ago]. I use to go out at lunch time and go looking at [clothing]. . . . I don't go looking at clothes anymore. (7)

These two comments, the former by one of the youngest informants (age 35), and the latter by one of the older informants (age 50) suggested that involvement in dress may be a function of age. However, age was not a consistent variable that
could be used to measure the informants' involvement in apparel. Many of the men age 34 to 44 described dress involvement experiences similar to those of the informants age 45 to 65.

The majority of informants (70%) in this study purchased their own professional clothing without assistance from their wives' or other women. Probes used to gather more information about their shopping behavior generated comments such as:

'Cause she doesn't like what I like, and I don't like what she likes. So typically we stay away from buying one another's clothes. But sometimes she see what she calls 'deals', and she can't resist a deal, so she will pick up something. (George/7)

Because her (wife's) tastes and my tastes are two different things. I think she wants me to look cute (laughs). I have a problem with that. (Otis/15)

Oh no [emphasis not added]! My wife has bought clothes on occasion for me because . . . . [She has said to me] 'that's too conservative, I need to pep you up'. But no, I know there are people that do [have their wife shop for them]. I just, I haven't made that transition. No, I do my own shopping. (Mitchell/13)

The men's comments suggest that wives' choices for business wear may reflect the elaborated dress code women have in this society. As 87% of the men identified themselves as conservative dressers, one can speculate that if permitted, their wives or female companions would chose more fashionable items versus the normative male business clothing. Because the majority of men were experienced clothing shoppers and had identified a particular style of business clothing they preferred, they may have felt comfortable eschewing female intervention in their business dress shopping activities.

The shopping behavior of the informants differs from the practices of male executives and managers age 31 to 50 described by Boswell (1993). The
following statement may describe a sample of white male business men; Boswell did not provide otherwise.

If married, his wife may do much of the shopping and she can have a major impact on wardrobe choices. Coordination of styles and garments may be difficult and time consuming for this man, and he often happily passes this responsibility on to his spouse with “Honey, what should I wear tonight?” (p. 3)

Only Isaac asked his wife to shop for him because of his time constraints. Isaac told his wife that he had confidence in her ability to select an item he liked, but was sometimes dissatisfied with her choices. He felt obligated to wear the items his wife purchased so that he would not offend her; he “depend[ed] on her to do things like that sometimes”.

Most of the informants’ statements about shopping trips did not include negative statements about the amount of time they used to select and purchase business clothing. This may indicate that the men used a minimum amount of time to shop or that shopping was an enjoyable experience for them.

Seven (47%) of the 15 men shopped when they perceived a need for an item, either as a replacement or an addition to their existing wardrobe. There were eight (53%) impulse shoppers or men who shopped on a whim. Describing himself as an "addict" shopper, John stated:

You go out and say, ‘Gosh, I have worn this enough now’, and you see something really nice. You are out shopping and you see something nice. ‘Man that would really look!’, and you buy it! I guess I don't plan, say two weeks from now, I will plan on buying a suit or a shirt. If I'm out and I see something, something that is really nice and it looks good, more than likely, I'll buy it. And in fact, I'll try to buy anywhere between 5 to 6 suits a year. Suits don't go out of style overnight. So you can keep, you start buying and accumulating suits, you have a lot of suits. So some of these suits are older suits that I have bought earlier or sometime ago, but they are still good looking suits. But, I try like I said, [to buy] five, six, seven suits [a year]. (10)
As a school principal, this informant often interacted with his younger students who greeted him with peanut butter and jelly stained hands. The possibility of permanently having his suit stained by his affectionate students or while performing maintenance repairs in the building was of minimal concern for this informant. More important was the professional appearance he projected and the example of business dress he demonstrated for his students, teachers, parents, and other school administrators.

Places where the men shopped were varied. Many of the men purchased their clothing in men's specialty stores, or in specific department stores in Des Moines. Some informants reported they purchased items while visiting other cities. Harvey maintained contact with a salesperson from the city where he formerly resided. The salesperson would call when new items that seemed suited to him arrived in the store. Norris often tried to incorporate in his business travel to an East Coast city a visit to a store specializing in silk ties and matching pocket squares. He felt that the selection of silk ties was "pathetic" in Des Moines, and avowed that:

   Almost everybody that buys 100% silk ties buys them out-of-town because you just can't get them here. (14)

Scott Omelianuk (1994), in a GQ article, recommended that "... a five-day-a-week man will do fine with a half dozen seasonal suits" (p.104). Similarly, others advised that men "... need at least seven suits to get [them] ... through the year" (Trachtenberg, 1994, p. 192). Molloy (1988) suggested men have a basic shirt wardrobe of 27 shirts.
The number of suits owned by the informants ranged from four to 80, and the average was 18. Eighty suits was an extreme count when compared to the number of suits that the other informants owned. If the average is recalculated without the maximum count of 80, the mean falls to 12. An average of 27 dress shirts and 59 ties was reported by the informants in their business wardrobe. A few of the men reported they kept their older ties, expecting them to become fashionable again.

On average, the men owned the exact amount of shirts suggested by men's fashion consultants but more than the minimum number of suits suggested. Many of the men said they wore suits six or seven days a week because they attended social and civic meetings outside of their workday, as well as church services that required them to wear suits.

John felt that his professional commitments necessitated that he put together a wardrobe that would project a professional image; therefore, he shopped often and purchased frequently.

... I put a lot of emphasis on buying clothes so that I can begin to put together a wardrobe that can make a statement, and I think it has to be so that it is a professional look. You know, I think parents are interested when they see a person that is dressed well, it tends to help in other areas. So I do buy a lot of clothes, and I think I have over 80 suits, and I just buy, buy, buy because I do feel that it is important to, as they would say, look good. (10)

Statistically, African American households spend 22% more on general apparel items than the U.S. population as a whole (Campanelli, 1991). John's shopping practices appeared to mirror that trend.

The informants talked with other men about where a particular clothing item was purchased, who manufactured an admired garment, or the cost of
clothing. Bernard recounted a long-term conversation with a co-worker about a particular item considered for purchase.

My co-worker and I have been talking about a pair of shoes for six months. [He] finally brought a pair of shoes, and I said, 'Hey, you got a new pair of shoes on' and he brought a new suit too. It looks good. (2)

Many of the men exchanged good-natured bantering with their co-workers about particular pieces of clothing or general styles worn.

But most the people here they kinda rip (tease) me every now and then because of the way that I dress. They like to have fun with me 'cause of my ties and my braces and the number of suits that they think I have or I do have, because of the way I switch things up on my shirts at times, [and] because they are different than what they wear. People make comments on my dress here. (Chris/3)

In answer to the question, do you ever comment on others' dress?

Yeah, if I see a nice suit, I say 'Hey, that is a nice suit.' 'Cause I like people to compliment me, so I don't have any problem with that at all, and especially black men. (Norris/14)

The men talked about enjoying the comments they received from others about their wardrobe:

Well, I tell you what encourages me a lot. My wife likes to see me dressed, and other people notice how I dress. So when people say to me "You really look nice", and "you have a reputation for wearing nice clothes", that really encourages me. (Harvey/8)

Different accessories were incorporated into the informants' wardrobe (i.e., bow ties, pocket squares, braces/suspenders, French cuffed shirts and cuff links, patterned socks). Some of these items were worn everyday; others were added sporadically and spontaneously.

It's just whatever you feel that particular day. It is more of an attitude. Do you want to be what they call quote 'sharp' today, you will put the cufflinks on, you can kinda dress up a little bit. (David/4)

I normally have a pocket square. (Harvey/8)
The majority of men mixed and matched the items in their business wardrobe (i.e., different shirts and/or ties with different suits/sports coats).

Mixing and matching accomplished a few goals: 1) it lengthened the life of their clothing:

When you have a set of shirts or suits or anything, it is only wise to rotate them so that you can preserve the longevity of them. Otherwise you are going to be buying more regularly. (Alex/1)

2) it expanded the wardrobe by giving them different options, as well as creating the illusion their wardrobe was more extensive than it actually was:

I mix. The reason being a lot of times people will see you in the suit and shirt and if they remember, but if you take and put a different shirt, they think you have a different suit on. And so, it changes the wardrobe. (John/10)

3) it allowed for an individualized expression of style

... it doesn’t have to be a special occasion to wear cuff links. Some people think it has to be. I don’t typically think it has to be a special occasion. I wear them when I feel like wearing them. (Bernard/2)

Harvey, however, did not enjoy mixing and matching his wardrobe.

I don’t like to try and match colored or plaid shirt with a tie. I just feel that, to me, I just don’t like the clashing colors. Some people prefer that, I’m conditioned always to just try and stick with the solid collar shirt. (8)

The above statements suggested that the informants’ interest in dress was multidimensional. Dress provided both an instrumental and hedonic value for some of the informants. Larry speculated that a male who demonstrated a high level of involvement or attention to his business dress could be seen as engaging in shallow activity and would be perceived as lacking substantive skill or competence. Therefore, he expected comments such as: "Well, my God, that guy has all that time to do that. Well he is not doing the important stuff" (12 ).
However, Larry believed that the amount of attention he devoted to meticulously coordinating his dress was justified because he was constantly meeting and interacting with people outside of his home office. He believed that an individual's appearance, on occasion, could be closely monitored by others "even down to the socks".

But, Larry also admitted that "... there is some vanity involved in it [close attention to dress]." For Larry and for some of the other men dress was a creative expression. In the workplace, this creativity emerged through subtleties, and "understatements" in their business wardrobe. The men took pride in the appearance they projected as professionals, but also felt that their dress was enviable. More than one man stated that his style of dress was imitated by others in his workplace.

The informants may be considered highly or more involved in business dress relative to other groups of males because of the quantity of items in their professional wardrobe, their active participation in shopping, and their consistent monitoring of current trends in business dress through magazines and people-watching. Further evidence of the men's involvement in dress were contained in the comments they made about the hedonic aspect of their business apparel. Several of the men commented how a particular fabric felt, how a certain style draped their body, or the satisfaction they experienced from finding the perfect tie to coordinate with a specific jacket. Lastly, their involvement in dress was revealed through the stories that the men unabashedly recounted when they were the "subject of gaze" due to their dress and the delight they received from that experience.
Ethnic identity

The previous themes have primarily focused on the informants' perception of their experience as African American business men in a white environment. Comments and anecdotes also shared by the informants explained what their business dress meant to them as African American men vis à vis other African Americans. The following discussions focuses on these relationships by examining the informants' past influences for dressing, level of involvement in the selection, purchase and coordination of their business wardrobe, and perception of the importance of their business dress to other blacks.

Past influences

Some of the informants' early influences that shaped their attitudes about appearance management and style of dress were generated from family, neighbors, and former employers.

I can tell you historically that I had a mother that made sure that I was adequately dressed everyday. And she taught me a lot about taking care of my clothes. I didn't always have a lot of clothes, but she insisted that the clothes that I had should always be clean. . . . And so, from that kind of a foundation, I've always been meticulous about clothes and vowed that if I ever got myself in a position to really be able to purchase clothes, I would purchase the best. (Harvey/8)

I use to work in a clothier. One of the mottos of the clothier there is to stand out quietly. So you do a little something different to sort of give you a little touch, a little individuality, just to be little creative, not just to follow in line to a trend. (Alex/1)

Others talked about growing up in segregated neighborhoods and being influenced by black adult males they remembered as being well-dressed and who they consciously desired to imitate.
I remember when I was a kid and I used to see these old dudes, and they look really clean. I said, ‘Oh man, maybe some day’. (Larry/12)

A number of other informants provided similar comments about their early involvement in clothing, such as having limited wardrobes or being admonished to present a “neat” appearance when they were children. Most of the men from an early age were actively engaged in the care, coordination and purchase of their clothing. Because of this early involvement, many of the men felt comfortable when wearing their business apparel and competent to purchase and coordinate it. Childhood admonitions to always present a clean and neat appearance were still guiding rules in the informants’ appearance management practices.

Camaraderie

Many of the men shared comments about the different dress practices they engaged in as members of the African American subculture and as members of mainstream America. These statements were usually related in discussions relative to interactions with other African American males. Otis stated that he would not wear his work attire to a meeting with his black fraternity brothers, nor would he wear the suit worn to fraternity meetings to work. His double-breasted suit would focus too much attention on him at his conservative work environment, and his drab gray suit would be viewed as too conservative at fraternity meetings.

Larry shared a story about attending a professional conference out-of-town where he met seven other black men - a rarity for him as he had previously been one of only a few black men or the sole black male at past conferences. Larry was
thrilled to be at a conference where he could see himself reflected back in the faces of these African American men.

During the four day conference, the eight black men met during the breaks where they discussed their “philosophical and political differences” and “established [a] friendship that was going on for the next millennium” (Larry /12). The culmination of the conference was a dinner, and Larry speculated that the men had spent a considerable amount of time dressing for it. Knowing that they would be critiqued by their fellow black males, each of the men entered the dining room in a way that would allow that review to happen:

I mean each guy fell in there and paused so he could get scoped [appraised] [big laugh]. (Larry/12)

The banter between the men that followed each arrival was good natured and expressed camaraderie and mutual support.

No, I ain't going to sit with you guys, you look better than me [new arrival]. Ah man, you don't look too bad--for a rookie [reply]. (Larry/12)

The bantering and teasing that transpired among the men related to dress was of a ritualistic nature. All of the men had a tacit understanding that their dress would be scrutinized by their fellow black men. Each man expected and welcomed the comments that would accompany his arrival. Young black males who engage in similar ritualistic behavior are attempting to “... show off or upstage others in a highly competitive war of masculine self-presentation” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 81).

For these eight men, dress “serve[d] as a medium for a shared cultural exchange” (Hall, 1992, p. 55).

Here were black administrators, all of us with the same challenges, different challenges, each one of us in a position of authority. And each one of having many, many challenges to face. And I noticed that we
all had a sense of humor, we all had a sense of focus, and we all in our own way, the thing that I would use to describe each one of the gentlemen that I met - *Elegant! Absolutely elegant.* And it was neat to be around eight brothers who could also hang. (Larry/12)

Larry’s comment illustrated the bicultural experience he had in both the corporate (white world) and in the African American community. He knew the requirements for success in the business world - be focused, address challenges, and be flexible. He also displayed that he was intimately involved in the African American community by his use of the word “hang”. Hang in the colloquial sense suggests that the individual is knowledgeable about African American male in-group behavior and practices it at least to a minimum level of skill. It is not clear if Larry’s use of hang alludes to the dress of the men or the bantering that was exchanged among them. Involvement in dress, both as a creator and appreciator, (see Fiore, Kimle, & Moreno, 1996; Fiore, Moreno, & Kimle, 1996) was a cultural activity that all eight men engaged in and expected from each other.

For Norris, dress was a visual affirmation that neither he nor all black men were the stereotypical black males commonly described in U.S. society.

It makes you feel good to be around a large group of professional black people that are really looking good. And I know when we go to our fraternity conclave, we will be a room with 3,000, all college graduates, upscale brothers, and they are all decked out in tuxedoes and whatever. And it makes you feel good. And you say ‘Hey, you know, we [pause] with all the bad things that everybody says about us, we are still making it’. (14)

Norris’ comment illustrated how visual confirmation coupled with verbal support from his fraternity brothers affected his self-esteem. Hall (1981) asserted
that "[a]s Black men forge forward in this competitive and hostile society, they are confronted by the fact that they have to work harder and be better than those males who are of the majority" (p. 164). Fraternal organizations can be sources of "... support and reinforcement from the 'brothers'" (Hall, 1981, p.165).

**Role model**

All of informants in this study considered it imperative to dress appropriately for work-related activity because of the roles they occupied in their business organizations. In addition, one of the informants talked about his responsibility as a vanguard for other African Americans that might seek employment at his company.

> And I look at it [this way], if I do well then somebody else [African American] coming behind me will do well. If I do bad, then no one else will get an opportunity. So if you have a bad image, bad influence, no one else is going to get that opportunity. And that is what you always have to be mindful of, especially when you are black in the workforce. Because if you do something wrong it magnifies. (Bernard/2)

Many of the men remembered former teachers or neighborhood men from their youth who had inspired them. Often these recollections would include images of the men dressed in the traditional suit.

> When I was in elementary school, the men all wore coats and ties. (Harvey/8)

> I remember when I was a kid and I use to see these old dudes, and they look really clean. I said, 'Oh man, maybe some day'. (Larry/12)

Having had positive role models as youths, some of the informants sensed they now could influence the lives of young black males by serving as role models. The men believed that a professional appearance was a helpful way to positively direct today's youth.
for young people that I see on a daily basis as a school administrator, I want to give them an opportunity to maybe see me dressed, and hopefully I can maybe be a role model for them. . . . We never know who is watching, and I certainly want to be dressed at a standard that will let people know that I feel pretty good about myself in my position and that this is the acceptable mode of dress. (Harvey/8)

The other reason I think it is good to dress appropriate being a black male is that if you have or if you go out to schools or you have young black kids come into a building and they don't see that many black males in the work force. So they see someone that is at least dressed up and looking professional and it may give them a better image as to where they want to be in life. (Bernard/2)

. . . the people that I reach out most to, even when I am not intending to on purpose, but I'm always, are young African American males. I always want these youngsters, and I don't mean to be sexist because I have just as much interest in the young African American female. It is just that for whatever reasons, I am always interested in where these young guys are and the images that they see. Because for a lot of young African American males the only guy they see in a suit is the preacher. They don't see other folks. And so I am always aware, and my particular style is really according to the youngster is "old fashioned" [laughs]. But let me tell you something, they take as much pride and pleasure in giving me a hard time because they know as one said to me, 'Mr. - - -, you be maxing' [dressing well]. I take that as a compliment. And I really want these young guys to understand that it is not the suit, it really isn't. It is just a tool. (Larry/12)

"Modeling has been known to play a major role in educational and psychosocial development" (Jones, Bibbin, & Henderson, 1994, p. 11). African American adult males (mentors) and African American male youth (mentees) involved in a mentoring program perceived that the program helped the youths feel better about themselves and resulted in increased self-esteem (Jones, Bibbin, & Henderson, 1994). "Thus, getting African American male youth to identify with positive individual[s] can lead them to incorporate that positiveness into their own identity " (Jones, Bibbin, & Henderson, 1994, p. 11). Many of the informants in this study were fraternity members, and because of this affiliation,
may have a greater awareness and commitment to a goal of providing positive
role models for African American male youth.

Otis saw his professional appearance as a tool for combating the negative
image others in society may have of black men.

When you turn on the tube or pick up the newspaper it is always a
black guy... it is just negative all the time. And I think by wearing a suit
that kind of contradicts that negative media image of black males all the
time... And I think it is important that I project a professional image and
a positive image. Right now I am mentoring a kid that got himself in
some trouble. He is kinda impressed that I wear a suit all the time... Plus I think it is important to show other people, not just other black
males, but other males that black men are not all thugs, and hoodlums,
drug dealers and pimps and etc. That is probably why, that is the big, that
is one influence on why I wear a suit. (15)

For this informant wearing a suit ameliorated the negative image projected in
the media that suggested that all black men are criminals, unsuccessful, and void
of self-esteem and pride. Many of the men were positively influenced early in
their lives by seeing images of black men in their neighborhood wearing suits
that held the positive symbolic meaning they attached to business dress. They
saw their professional dress image as one way of counteracting the negative
stereotype fostered in the media about black males.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the present study was to examine the business dress of African American males to understand how ethnicity influences their aesthetic preferences and adherence to dress norms. Literature was reviewed to understand what different influences shaped the African American culture relative to mainstream culture. Hegemonic practices in the U.S. and extant influences from Africa were found to be significant in the formation of and current maintenance of African American culture.

From the review of literature, research questions specific to the informants about their ethnicity were shaped. The literature was also useful during the analysis phase in supporting and explaining findings.

A purposive sampling of 15 African American males employed as administrators, managers, and executives in Des Moines, Iowa, participated in this study. A semi-structured interview format was used to solicit responses to specific questions and provided a forum for the informants to discuss additional topics not touched upon by the researcher. The constant comparative method of data analysis was adopted for this study.

Other research has used a variety of lenses to examine the influence of ethnicity on mentoring relationships and compensation attainment, career paths for ethnic employees, and retirement expectations by race, ethnicity and gender. The present study's findings can illustrate how dress is a window to exploring
the complexities involved in taking on a professional role when the role-taker is a numerical minority within upper levels of the organizational hierarchy.

Executives and managers interviewed for the current study believed that their specific organizations had an established dress code for their position and expected employees to adhere to that code. Additionally, clients and customers were perceived as having very clear expectations for informants' business dress. Dress conformity was seen by the informants as a job requirement. It signaled that the informants were willing to adopt the uniform of the firm and profession and thereby expressed their loyalty and commitment to their work role and organization. Conforming to the dress norm reflected that the informants wanted the symbolism they associated with business dress to apply to them personally and indicate that were credible and competent in their job roles.

Because of the past history of assumptions that African American men were "uncivilized heathens" and "delinquents and criminals", the informants did not believe that credibility and competence would be readily assigned to them. Conformity to dress was therefore seen as important because it increased the likelihood that they would be viewed as bonafide professionals. Presenting an appearance consistent with new client or customer expectations could also provide a more conducive environment for business transactions while simultaneously offering an image that may differ from a stereotypical image held.

As numerical minorities in executive and managerial settings, some of the informants believed their behavior would be assessed as representative of
their ethnic subgroup. For this reason, they believed that attention to their dress was more crucial for them than it was to their white male counterparts. Presenting a well-groomed appearance could communicated to their employers that they understood the organizational culture and were willing to adhere to the values and norms established in their respective businesses. Additionally, the informants saw their positions as executives and managers to be opportunities to serve as role models for young black males.

Because much of the current research focuses on female professionals in the business settings, popular literature was helpful to identify men’s current business dress issues. Casual dress in the workplace has received considerable attention in the popular press. One major point of concern has been men’s ambiguity about what is appropriate attire for the workplace on casual dress days. The African American men interviewed for the current study were concerned about losing a clear indicator of their positions as executives and managers if they were attired in casual dress, albeit corporate casual dress. This may be a danger when race can so easily be a sign of lower status to whites.

Another area of men’s dress receiving some attention in popular press is aesthetics or the concept of “styling”. It was believed that in Western society, interest in dress was a domain exclusive to females (Horn & Gurel, 1981). Some men’s publications urge men to engage in more hedonic aspects of dress and go to great length to explain how and why they should become more involved in the selection of their wardrobe.
Many of the African American men in the current study stated that their involvement in professional dress extended beyond the professional requirement to conform to the organization's dress norms. They shopped independently, were knowledgeable about quality of materials or fabrics, and actively kept abreast of new trends by observing displays in stores and reading men's fashion magazines.

The informants' attention to dress may be greater than the level of involvement in dress that is generally described about men by the popular literature. Ethnicity could be a factor that contributes to this seemingly increased level of involvement. The men had a long history of involvement in clothing that extended from admiring the dress of adult males in their childhood neighborhoods to workday window shopping over the lunch hour.

For these African American men, the aesthetic dimension of dress was not trivial. For example, the men enjoyed the interplay involved in mixing and matching their wardrobe components so that they created a well-groomed and elegant appearance. They also delighted in the feeling derived from certain fabrics or the drape of particular pants. The men also took pleasure in being the subject of gaze because of their well-groomed appearance. For many of these men, dress was an opportunity to express their individuality, an expression of their aesthetic ability, and a site for mutual appreciation of dress and its hedonic characteristics.

Because the men's involvement in dress transcended their professional obligation, it may be hypothesized that dress provided a site for simultaneously
satisfying restrictive dress codes without sacrificing individuality, creativity and ethnic identity. As African Americans, the men were mindful that their behavior, (i.e., dress and other activity), could be more closely scrutinized than their white counterparts; therefore they ensured that their dress was within the range of acceptable business attire. However, by not totally imitating the dress pattern perpetuated by hegemonic norms, dress became a platform to express subtle and complex messages of resistance. Additionally, mixing and matching of dress components allowed the men to engage in improvisational behavior that is valued in the African American community.

Directions For Future Research

The present study does not clearly identify if the amount of involvement in dress that some of the informants engaged is different than that of their white coworkers. A cross-cultural study may reveal that ethnicity is a significant influence in men's clothing involvement. Also, other meaningful differences may be revealed through this type of research.

The present study reveals that motivations and preferences for men's business dress can have different influences relative to ethnicity. As discussed earlier, women, still a minority in executive roles in business, were found to favor a more varied style of business dress. A future outcome of successful inclusion of women and minorities in executive roles may be that the dress code in managerial settings may be undergoing long-lasting changes. A contrasting forecast would be that men in business may feel compelled to adhere to the
traditional dress code so that they are distinguished from women. Future research could examine if business dress undergoes changes that incorporate aesthetic preferences from subgroups previously not occupying executive or managerial positions in large numbers.

The increased use of technology means that some companies are relaxing their dress codes because they are not interacting with their customers on a face-to-face basis everyday (Hendricks, 1996). It is not clear if this trend will have effects in situations where traditional dress is still worn (i.e., major meetings or appointments with clients). Future research can examine if the traditional meanings associated with the "uniform" are changing as firms incorporate more technology into their business activities and less personal contact with their clients.

Limitations of study

The purpose of the current study was to gain an understanding of issues that were important to African American business men relative to dress. To that end, interviews were conducted with 15 black male executives, managers, and administrators in Des Moines, Iowa, a city with less than five percent of its population composed of African Americans. The non-random sample was derived from personal acquaintances and by means of the snowball technique. Informants were asked the same set of questions, but encouraged to contribute additional information they felt was valuable in understanding their preferences.
and motivations for business dress. Therefore, responses were not highly controlled and can not be precisely counted across respondents to give incidence.

The format of the interview sessions allowed the informants to discuss their involvement in dress in ways not necessarily preconceived by the researcher. In addition, discussions about ethnicity may be awkward to start because of the sensitivity of the subject. Because the informants and the researcher were of the same ethnicity, dialogue focusing on ethnic issues were discussed freely and easily.

Rich information and examples were gathered during the interviews indicating that ethnic identity and job identity were simultaneously negotiated by the informants. Motivations for business dress not covered in the literature were revealed through these interviews. As an example, many of the informants saw themselves as role models for young black males and therefore attended to their appearance so that they presented a positive image for those young males.

The sampling method used and the number of informants do not allow conclusions that the findings from the present study are generalizable. However, the purpose of the study was to gain an emic understanding of issues important to African American business men regarding their dress. To that end, the current study has contributed. Replicated studies conducted in different geographical locations may reveal different preferences for dress, but similar motivations. For example, presenting a well-groomed image as a form of
resistance against hegemony may be perceived as equally important for African American men in large metropolitan cities.

This research explores new ground leading to an understanding of how ethnic minorities use dress in work roles in U.S. businesses and organizations. The findings indicate that appearance plays a complex role in establishing and negotiating professional and ethnic identity in the workplace. Future studies examining other social constructs, such as gender or sexual orientation, can also add to our understanding of human behavior.

By continuously "pivoting the lens" in our examination of all subgroups that comprise U.S. society, we can gain insights into how taken-for-granted phenomena are socially constructed behaviors. From these vantage points, we can identify and challenge hegemonic systems of oppression that benefit one group vis-à-vis another group. Strategies used by subgroups to resist hegemony and celebrate group identity can be learned through these examinations.
APPENDIX A: HUMAN SUBJECTS FORM
Information for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects
Iowa State University
(Please type and use the attached instructions for completing this form)


2. I agree to provide the proper surveillance of this project to insure that the rights and welfare of the human subjects are protected. I will report any adverse reactions to the committee. Additions or changes in research procedures after the project has been approved will be submitted to the committee for review. I agree to request renewal of approval for any project continuing more than one year.

Harriet McLeod
Typed Name of Principal Investigator
Textiles & Clothing
Department
1052 LeBaron
Campus Address
9/1/95
Date
Signature of Principal Investigator
294-0948
Campus Telephone

3. Signatures of other investigators

Mary Lynn Damhorst
Typed Name of other investigator
9/1/95
Date
Major Advisor

4. Principal Investigator(s) (check all that apply)

☐ Faculty ☐ Staff ☐ Graduate Student ☐ Undergraduate Student

5. Project (check all that apply)

☐ Research ☐ Thesis or dissertation ☐ Class project ☐ Independent Study (490, 590, Honors project)

6. Number of subjects (complete all that apply)

20 # Adults, non-students
# ISU student
# minors under 14
# minors 14 - 17

7. Brief description of proposed research involving human subjects: (See instructions, Item 7. Use an additional page if needed.)

Hour long tape-recorded interviews will be conducted with these informants. Each informant will be asked a series of questions (see attached) to explore issues of aesthetics, conformity and ethnic identity that may affect their business dress behavior. Ample time will be provided for the informants to share any additional thoughts and motives for their dress preferences and habits.

(Please do not send research, thesis, or dissertation proposals.)

8. Informed Consent: ☐ Signed informed consent will be obtained. (Attach a copy of your form.)
☐ Modified informed consent will be obtained. (See instructions, item 8.)
☐ Not applicable to this project.
9. Confidentiality of Data: Describe below the methods to be used to ensure the confidentiality of data obtained. (See instructions, item 9.)

The interviews will be tape-recorded by myself, the principal investigator and also transcribed by myself. No identifying labels will be used. The tapes will be erased by May 31, 1996.

10. What risks or discomfort will be part of the study? Will subjects in the research be placed at risk or incur discomfort? Describe any risks to the subjects and precautions that will be taken to minimize them. (The concept of risk goes beyond physical risk and includes risks to subjects' dignity and self-respect as well as psychological or emotional risk. See instructions, item 10.)

None.

11. CHECK ALL of the following that apply to your research:

- A. Medical clearance necessary before subjects can participate
- B. Samples (Blood, tissue, etc.) from subjects
- C. Administration of substances (foods, drugs, etc.) to subjects
- D. Physical exercise or conditioning for subjects
- E. Deception of subjects
- F. Subjects under 14 years of age and/or
- G. Subjects in institutions (nursing homes, prisons, etc.)
- H. Research must be approved by another institution or agency (Attach letters of approval)

If you checked any of the items in 11, please complete the following in the space below (include any attachments):

Items A - D  Describe the procedures and note the safety precautions being taken.

Item E  Describe how subjects will be deceived; justify the deception; indicate the debriefing procedure, including the timing and information to be presented to subjects.

Item F  For subjects under the age of 14, indicate how informed consent from parents or legally authorized representatives as well as from subjects will be obtained.

Items G & H  Specify the agency or institution that must approve the project. If subjects in any outside agency or institution are involved, approval must be obtained prior to beginning the research, and the letter of approval should be filed.
Checklist for Attachments and Time Schedule

The following are attached (please check):

12. [X] Letter or written statement to subjects indicating clearly:
   a) purpose of the research
   b) the use of any identifier codes (names, #s), how they will be used, and when they will be
      removed (see Item 17)
   c) an estimate of time needed for participation in the research and the place
   d) if applicable, location of the research activity
   e) how you will ensure confidentiality
   f) in a longitudinal study, note when and how you will contact subjects later
   g) participation is voluntary; nonparticipation will not affect evaluations of the subject

13. [X] Consent form (if applicable)

14. [ ] Letter of approval for research from cooperating organizations or institutions (if applicable)

15. [X] Data-gathering instruments

16. Anticipated dates for contact with subjects:
   First Contact
   September 25, 1995
   Last Contact
   October 30, 1995

17. If applicable: anticipated date that identifiers will be removed from completed survey instruments and/or audio or visual
   tapes will be erased:
   May 31, 1996

18. Signature of Departmental Executive Officer
   Date
   Department or Administrative Unit
   Mary Litrell
   9/11/95  Textiles & Clothing

19. Decision of the University Human Subjects Review Committee:
   [X] Project Approved  [ ] Project Not Approved  [ ] No Action Required
   Patricia M. Keith
   Name of Committee Chairperson
   9/14/95
   Signature of Committee Chairperson
   [Signature]
APPENDIX B: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION
September 00, 1999

Mr. John Smith
123 Main Street.
Any City, IA 50000

Dear Mr. Smith,

I am a graduate student in the Textiles and Clothing Department at Iowa State University. Presently, I am studying how African American male managers/executives, specifically in the Des Moines area, dress in their business environments. How ethnicity affects or influences the dress behavior of male executives has not been studied; therefore, this research will initiate examination of this topic. Your name was given to me by ________ as someone who is employed in this type of position and may be willing to assist me in this study.

My study consists of an interview that will last about one hour. If you participate, I will ask you a series of questions and provide an opportunity for you to share any additional information with me about your business appearance and characteristics of your job and workplace. I will telephone your office next week to see if you are interested in participating in this study and, if so, make an appointment with you for an interview.

Thank you for your time, I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Harriet McLeod
Graduate Student
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM
CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study examining African American male executives' business apparel. I hope to learn what issues are considered by African American male executives when they shop for their business wardrobe, and plan their daily attire. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a white-collar worker and wear a business suit regularly. You will be one of a total of 10 - 20 subjects in this study.

If you decide to participate, I will conduct one tape-recorded interview with you during which I will ask you a series of questions concerning your business clothing and characteristics of your job and workplace. The interview will take about one hour.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Tapes from the interview will be transcribed only by myself. No personal identifiers will be included in the transcription. The tapes will be destroyed by May 31, 1996.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your present or future relations with Iowa State University. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any questions, please ask me. If you have any additional questions later, I will be happy to answer them. You may reach me (Harriet McLeod) at (515) 294-0948, Iowa State University, Textiles and Clothing Department, 1052 LeBaron Hall, Ames, Iowa 50011-1120. The faculty person supervising this study is Dr. Mary Lynn Damhorst. She can be reached at the same address or phoned at (515) 294-9919.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Signature of Investigator
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

• How long have you lived in this area?
• Where did you live prior to moving to this area?
• How long have you worked for this company?
• How long have you been employed in this position?
• What is your title?
• What are your main duties and responsibilities?
• What were some previous jobs that you have held?

TYPICAL DAY

• Describe a typical work day.
• On a daily basis, what are some of the things that you consider when you are dressing for work?
• Describe your normal work attire - type of shirt collar, type of shirt cuffs, style of suit (single breasted, side/back vent), color of suit, color of shirt, style of tie (bow, regular), vest, accessories (jewelry, watch, suspenders, belt, hat), shoes and socks, scent (fragrance), facial hair, fabrics preferred.
• Do you tend to wear the same shirt and tie only with one particular suit, or do you mix and match these items?
• Have you changed your business dress from your last position? Why?
• What is your opinion of the current trend "dress down days"?
• Does your company practice Casual Friday--or dress down day?
• If your company practices "dress down day" do you participate?
• What steps do you take in getting dressed for these days?
SHOPPING HABITS
• Do you shop for your work attire?
• How often do you shop? or how often are clothes purchased for you?
• When do you decide you need/want something new?
• How do you determine what you will buy?
• How is your wardrobe built? (along color, fabric, style lines)
• Do you have a specific wardrobe budget?
• What factors are important to you when you are shopping for business clothes? (Style, color, fabric, cost)
• When you buy a suit, do you purchase a coordinate shirt and tie at the same time?
• Are there any particular styles, colors, fabrics that you do not incorporate into your business wardrobe?
• How do you keep updated on current styles of business dress?
• How many suits do you have? How many dress shirts do you own? How many ties?

DRESS CODE
• Does your company have a dress code for someone in your position?
• What do you think is the purpose of this dress code?
• How was this dress code communicated to you? (written, verbal, or by example)
• Is the dress code implied or clearly stated?
• Before you started in this position, did you have a different sense of what was appropriate attire than what you have now?
• How closely do your co-workers adhere to the dress code of your organization?
• How closely do you adhere to the business dress code of this organization?
• Do you feel that your business dress behavior is scrutinized by your supervisors and fellow employees?
• How closely do you scrutinized the dress behavior of your fellow employees, supervisors?

DRESS PERCEPTIONS
• In general, what do you think is our society's general impression of someone wearing a suit?
• What does the wearing of a business suit symbolize to you?
• As an African American do you think this symbolism applies to you?
• Do you ever receive verbal comments from your co-workers on your business dress? Please describe.
• How would you compare your business dress with your fellow employees? Why?
• How important do you think your appearance (clothes, hair, and overall grooming) is in your daily contact with supervisors, fellow employees and customers?
• Do customers ever comment on your business dress?
• In your business environment, are you ever mistaken for an "outsider" or someone in a lower position by a new employee or a new customer, or have you not had this sort of experience?
• Why do you think that occurred?
• Are there any aspects of your business dress that are indicative of your African-American culture?

Do you have a favorite business outfit, and how do you feel when you wear it?

FUTURE TRENDS
• If you were initiating a dress code for someone in your position, what would proper attire be?
• What issues are impacting business and may affect future business dress?

DEMOGRAPHICS
• What is your age?
• What is your marital status?
• What is the ethnicity of your spouse or significant other?
• What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
  high school
  some college
  college degree
  some graduate work
  graduate degree(s)
APPENDIX E: CODING GUIDE
CODING GUIDE

A. Clothing influences
People, places, financial situations and geographical locations that influenced involvement in shopping for clothing, maintenance of clothing, and philosophy about appearance.
1. Family
2. Educators
3. Community members
4. Prior geographical locales
5. Employment in clothing related industry
6. Prior financial status
7. Age changes
8. Dress for success seminar/color consulting
9. Background - general

B. Shopping practices
Activities related to the purchase or acquisition of traditional business dress or casual dress worn in the business environment.
1. Frequency of shopping trips
2. Where
   a) local
   b) out-of-town
   c) out-of-country
3. Purchase agent
   a) self
   b) wife
   c) others
4. Items acquired
   a) quantity
   b) assortment
   c) condition
      1) gift
      2) new
      3) hand-me-down
5. Motivation
   a) replace worn/stained item
   b) augment wardrobe
   c) bored with current garment
   d) weight gain/loss
6. Constraints
   a) finance
   b) time
   c) limited local selection
7. Preparation prior to purchase
   a) planned
   b) impulse

8. Evaluative criteria
   a) quality
   b) quantity
   c) fabric
   d) comfort
   e) versatility
   f) sale item
   g) name brand
   h) good fit

9. Length of time involved in shopping trip
   a) comparison shopping - more than one store
   b) one store

C. Wardrobe updating
   Activities surrounding the monitoring of current styles, adaptation to
   new looks, and motivations for or against updating the wardrobe.
   1. Compliance with current trends
      a) yes
      b) no
   2. Information source
      a) media
      b) individuals
      c) store displays
   3. Reasons
      a) current style worn defunct
      b) self-motivated
      c) emulation of others
         1) celebrities
         2) supervisors/upper management
         3) peers

D. Clothing aspirations
   Professional clothing items not currently owned, but desired in the
   future.
   1. Quantity
   2. Custom made
   3. Fabric content
   4. Quality of item

E. Hazards to business clothing
   People or situations encountered during the workday that may
   harm/stain clothing.
1. Children
2. Food
3. Factory/farm equipment

F. Personal dress behavior

Activities surrounding the daily selection, coordination and maintenance of the business wardrobe.

1. When daily attire prepared
   a) amount of time involved in preparation/selection
   b) motivation for dress that day
      1) special activity
      2) normal day
      3) specific feeling/mood
      4) rotation of wardrobe concerns

2. Usual garments worn
   a) fabric
   b) colors
   c) accessories
   d) embellishments
   e) type of suit
   f) type of shirt
   g) type of tie
   h) type of shoes
   i) mix and matching strategy
   j) conservative style
   k) conservative with exception
   l) flashy

3. Wardrobe size
   a) quantity of suits
   b) quantity of shirts
   c) quantity of ties

4. Overall appearance aimed for
   a) well maintained
   b) professional
   c) stylish
   d) aesthetically pleasing

5. Length of time business dress worn each day

6. Number of days business dress worn each week
   a) 3 days or less
   b) 4 - 5 days
   c) 6 -7 days

7. Maintenance of clothing done by
   a) professional
   b) self
G. Inactive wardrobe
Stockpile of items in business wardrobe that have not been worn or seldom worn.
1. Reason
   a) never worn/new
   b) old
2. Item
3. Quantity

H. Comfort/ease of wearing concerns
Apparel that restricts movement or requires adjustment during the day.
1. Fit
   a) thigh area
   b) stomach area
   c) uneven arms/leg lengths
   d) feet area
2. Ease of wearing
   a) putting on/taking off
   b) bulk of items

I. Conversations about clothing with others
Comments about dress either made to others or received from others.
1. Made to others
   a) when comment made
   b) motivation
   c) frequency
2. Received from others
   a) who made comment
   b) when comment made
   c) frequency
   d) affect/effect generated from comment
3. Discussion with others
   a) when
   b) frequency

J. Company dress code
Business dress code, either written or unwritten, and how it was communicated.
1. Written
   a) business attire, not specific
   b) specified garment pieces
2. Unwritten
   a) told to by others
   b) understood through monitoring
3. No recognized code

K. Contact with public
   Work-related interactions with external audiences.
   1. Frequency
   2. Reason
   3. Position of other
   4. Where interaction occur
      a) at home office
      b) at others company
      c) public space/planned
      d) public space/unplanned
   5. Number of days spent in home office
      a) 3 days or less
      b) 4 - 5 days
      c) fear of misplacing/losing items

L. High visibility
   Phenomena associated with being noticed because of ethnicity.
   1. Personal work environment
   2. Other business environments
   3. Other public settings
   4. Perception of ethnicity affecting interaction with others

M. Target for appropriate appearance
   Perception of who wearer feels responsible to for wearing appropriate clothing.
   1. Employee’s company
   2. Other members of ethnic group
      a) colleagues, peers, future employees in same ethnic group
      b) youth
   3. clientele

N. Clothing utility
   Instrumental and hedonic value of business clothing to the wearer.
   1. Instrumental - image
      a) affect on job evaluation
      b) affect on job promotion
      c) aids uniformity
      d) affects comfort level of people interacted with
      e) competence/credibility
      f) first impression/introduction
      g) secure sale
      h) conformity
      i) uniqueness
j) role identifier
k) contradict black image in media/society
l) build self-esteem
m) demonstrate pride

2. Aesthetic outlet
   a) for self
   b) for others

O. Psychological affect of clothing on wearer
Affect achieved by the wearing of specific types of apparel which may affect job performance.
1. Traditional business attire
   a) feels comfortable or positive in some way
   b) feels uncomfortable or negative in some way
2. Corporate casual attire
   a) feels comfortable or positive in some way
   b) feels uncomfortable or negative in some way

P. Adaptation to environment
Modifications to regular business dress to conform to different environments or customers/clients.
1. Reasons
   a) new client
   b) major meeting
   c) different environment than regular workplace
   d) different activities at workplace
   e) camouflage role
2. Modification method
   a) change garment color
   b) change garment style
   c) remove garment
   d) change type of clothing / business-> casual

Q. Dress down/casual day
Business days where the regular dress code is relaxed to a less formal attire.
1. Participation by company
   a) frequency in one week
   b) applies to staff/office personnel
      1) without exception
      2) only if no visitors
      3) no casual day
   c) applies to executives
      1) without exception
      2) only if no visitors
3) no casual day

2. Personal participation
   a) conformity
      1) yes
      2) no
   b) appropriate attire
      1) already own
      2) special purchase
   c) personal opinion about casual day practice

3. Future of casual day practice
   a) elimination of casual day
   b) move to even more casual dress

R. Overall personal opinion about business dress
   General opinion about the importance of business dress and how involved the individual is in business dress.
   1. Importance
   2. Involvement in clothing
      a. likes clothes
      b. clothes as utility tool only
      c. not involved with clothes
   3. Wardrobe advice to others

Z. Miscellaneous
REFERENCES


