Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

Uncloaking the Anxiety behind Professional Dress

Julie Rubinger
Ryerson University

Sandra Tullio-Pow
Ryerson University

Uncloaking the Anxiety behind Professional Dress

Julie Rubinger, Sandra Tullio-Pow, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada

Key words: Clothing, professional, recent graduates, social identity theory

Achieving a university education is one of life's greatest milestones, with degree requirements complete; students expect their stress will subside. However, transitioning from student life to career track entails negotiating a whole new set of different stressful conditions. This research provides essential insights into the lived experience of preparing to dress for professional workplaces, wardrobe decision-making, predominant stressors, and how this translates women's identities.

In Canada, 46% of women in the labor force are employed within professional realms; i.e., finance, real estate, public administration and health care (Statistics Canada, 2011). Professional women are required to be sensitive to a variety of different, opposing dress needs. This pressure to dress "right" offers the wearer an excess of stress and anxiety (Clarke & Miller, 2002), justifying research into this area.

This study used a mixed methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques (Creswell, 2009) within an overarching theoretical perspective of social identity theory (SIT). SIT suggests that people identify themselves by sharing similarities with certain social groups as well as taking note of the differences between others (Hornsey, 2008). Using this theoretical framework, it was hypothesized that students would have a difficult time transitioning from their student identity into their professional career, with this challenge manifesting itself in difficulties preparing to dress for the professional office.

Two unique perspectives were investigated: (1) those from newly graduated females working within professional realms, and (2) those of fashion experts within a large Canadian urban city. Participants included 15 females, recent post-secondary graduates, professionally employed, recruited from three different sources: (1) a media-oriented business organization, (2) alumni from an urban university, and (3) word-of-mouth. Participants completed an informed consent form, demographic questionnaire, and phone interview. Questions focused on how participants chose their office clothes, why work attire was important to them, as well as personal challenges and devised solutions. Participants also completed a modified version of a standardized questionnaire, the "State-Trait Inventory for Cognitive and Somatic Anxiety" (STICSA) (Ree, MacLeod, French, and Locke, 2000). Given the focus of this research project, only the Trait Anxiety portion (how an individual generally feels towards a specific event) was administered (STICSA-T). Those who participated received a $10.00 coffee gift card. Phone interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and STICSA-T scores analyzed. In order to determine best wardrobe practices, 5 fashion experts were also interviewed to explore their opinions on office attire requirements, how women experience dressing for work, and the evolution of professional wear.

Interviews with recent graduates were coded into six thematic categories: (1) Perception, (2) Guidance, (3) Context Dependent, (4) Compromise, (5) Challenges, and (6) Solutions.
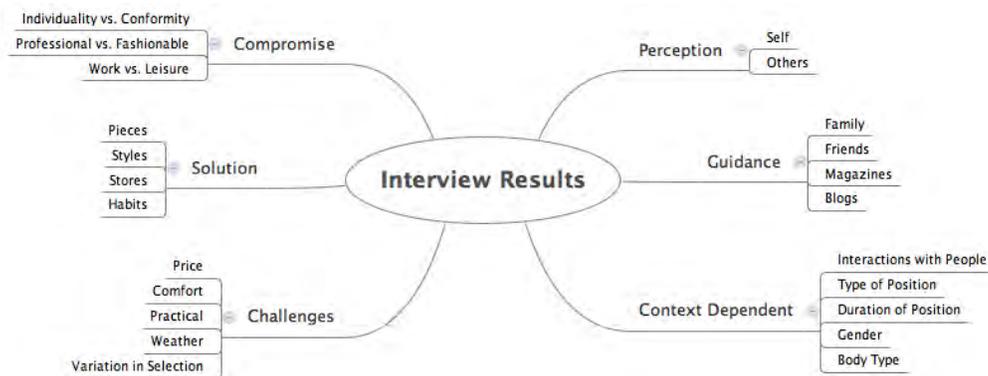
Figure 1. Recent Graduate Interview Results

The level of anxiety experienced was not articulated specifically, rather than stating they experienced anxiety when considering their professional dress, participants spoke of the ease with which they dressed for leisure. Overall, STICSA-T results revealed that women did not experience significant anxiety, however; participants assigned high scores to specific questions. Many women identified dressing for the workplace as a skill, and categorized themselves as being a "good" or "bad" dresser. This personal association demonstrated self-awareness as well as knowledge of the expected dress code proficiency level.

Interviews with fashion experts were also coded into thematic categories, some of which included direction, strategy, and anxiety. In contrast to results from recent graduates, fashion experts agreed that they had witnessed and been approached by women who experienced anxiety when preparing dress for the office.

While significant anxiety was not determined in study results, uncertainty was witnessed in compromising attire demands. As predicted, recent graduates experienced difficulties managing wardrobe choices required to establish a professional identity. Findings will be utilized to create wardrobe guides and workshops for new graduates entering professional realms.

References

Clarke, A. and Miller, D. (2002). "Fashion and Anxiety." Fashion Theory, *6(2),* 191-214.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* California: Sage Publications.

Dam, Nicholas T. Van, Gros, Daniel F., Earleywine, Mitch, and Antony, Martin M. (2013). "Establishing a trait anxiety threshold that signals likelihood of anxiety disorders". *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping,* 26(1), 70-86, doi: 10.1080/10615806.2011.631525

Honsey, M. (2008). "Social Identity Theory and Self Categorization: A Historical Review." Social and Personality Psychology, *2(1),* 204-222.

Ree, M. J., French, D., MacLeod, C., & Locke, V. (2008). Distinguishing cognitive and somatic dimensions of state and trait anxiety (STICSA). Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy, *36*(3), 313-332. doi: 10.1017/S1352465808004232

Statistics Canada. (2011). Employment by Industry and Sex. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from http://www40.statcan.ca/l01/cst01/labor10a-eng.html