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An exploratory study of business attire: formal or casual

Introduction

Global climate change has had significant impact on all aspects of life, ranging from consumer shopping behaviors to corporate business practices. Today's consumers are becoming more aware of global warming and the issues of sustainability that might help alleviate the crisis. They are reducing their use of fossil fuels, buying fuel-efficient automobiles, using solar or wind technologies to power their home, and in 2007, a survey commissioned by Deloitte & Touche revealed that nearly one-fifth of the consumers interviewed were willing to purchase more eco-friendly products in the future (Welch, 2007).

Alongside with the rise of individual awareness, many countries have been

re-assessing their own business practices within industry and the corporate milieu.

One of the areas where conscious efforts are being made is in the reduction of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. In 2005, the Ministry of the Environment (MOE) in Japan introduced the “Cool Biz” initiative to reduce energy consumption, mandating the lowering of thermostat temperatures to 28 degrees Celsius in the air-conditioned workplace (Arita, 2005). As a part of this campaign, they also promoted a “business casual” dress code that encouraged employees to wear comfortable, light-weight clothing to work. Casual, lighter-weight clothing made of natural fibers that “breathe” (e.g., cotton and linen) would require less forced air cooling and would be more appropriate for the “Cool Biz” initiative. In 2006, the Hong Kong government’s Special Administrative Region (SAR) also launched a similar campaign – the “Action Blue Sky”, using a slogan of “Clean Air for a Cool Hong Kong” to address the environmental concern. Their proposal mandates the setting of air-conditioners to 25.5 degree Celsius that would save approximately 1 billion units of electricity each year.

With this context in mind, we initiated this research project as a response to the Hong Kong government’s “Action Blue Sky” campaign. The objective of this study has two-fold: (1) to understand white-collar employee perceptions and attitudes toward a

“business casual” dress code, (2) to identify, develop, and design a set of guidelines and recommendations of a “Cool Biz”-like code for the Hong Kong government as well as for other private business enterprises.

In order to generate some meaningful and practical guidelines, a number of questions were raised to direct and guide this study - What type of clothing is appropriate for business settings? What are the consumers’ perceptions and attitude toward traditional/formal business attire? What clothing attributes should be considered for business casual attire? How do white-collar workers perceive and respond to business casual? Do consumers perceive eco-friendly attribute as a salient factor when they purchase business casual?

The rest of this paper is organized in five sections. The first section reviews literature that related to business attire encompassing its function, appropriateness, and impact.

In the next section, we extended our literature review to clothing attributes and consumer’s perceptions. In the third section, we explain the methodology and measuring instruments employed for this study. In the following section, we discuss and address the analysis and empirical findings. Finally, we conclude our study with implications and recommendations.

Business Attire – Functions and Impacts

Clothing has been used as a signifier to maintain, express, and construct individual and organizational identity (Conner *et al.*, 1975; Rafaeli *et al.*, 1997). It is a powerful non-verbal communicator in today's business arena. As Rafaeli *et al.* (1997) asserted, "... individuals use dress as a symbol to engage and execute their role schemata in organization".

Many impression formation literature reports that appropriate attire and appearance in the workplace yields positive or favorable interpretative inferences and could play an important part in one's career. Wearers use appropriate attire to manage and influence the impression of others (Peluchette *et al.*, 2006), and the consistent appearance of dress could play an important role on the membership schema as well as the hierarchial levels within an organization (Rafaeli *et al.*, 1997). Forsythe *et al.*, (1984) pointed out that job advancement is closely related to an individual's attire and appearance.

The appearance of a person may reflect his/her attitudes of respect for the company, colleagues and clients. Appropriate dress and physical appearance often serves as

an indicator or judging surrogate of an individual's personality (socialability, attractiveness), can present the right image (professionalism, competence), generate positive psychological benefits (trust) and enhance one's self-perception of their occupational attributes (confidence) in the workplace (Kellerman and Laird, 1982; Solomon and Douglas, 1985).

Many prior studies also report that how one dresses for a job interview could affect the interviewer's perception and decision-making (Johnson and Roach-Higgins, 1987; Silverman, 2001; Workman, 1984). Workman's (1984) study on appropriate and inappropriate attire for a summer job interview shows that an interviewee dressed in a suit was more positively rated than one dressed in overall. The formally dressed individual was judged to be more intelligent, confident, responsible, creative, and capable than a person dressed in a casual manner. As Sherry Maysonave suggests in her book *Casual Power* (1999), "People think you're smarter when you're well dressed".

However, it has been difficult to define or identify what type of clothing is appropriate for modern business settings. The ideal business clothing may vary across cultures, type of businesses or organizations. As such, it is almost impossible to form a "one size fits all" policy that can apply to every organization in Hong Kong. Some

companies are less rigid as to what an employee wears in the office; allowing them to choose more casual clothing over formal ones. However, when employees push the boundaries of casual dress codes too far – by wearing jeans, shorts, capri pants, halter tops and T-shirts to work – the senior executives or employers may consider these particular garments to be completely inappropriate for the business environment. Recently, many multinational corporations have re-adopted formal business attire policies and/or developed more stringent dress codes that list accepted “do’s” and “don’ts” for the workplace. For instance, Deutsche Bank and Bear Stearns have recently re-adopted a more traditional and formal business attire policy that will reflect a more serious and professional image. Merrill Lynch and JP Morgan have prohibited their employees from wearing shorts and jeans to work (Moses, 2003; Sinoski, 2002).

Over the last decade, “business casual” has become a new fashion trend in the corporate community that goes hand-in-hand with governmental attempts to reduce energy consumption. In 2006, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong SAR, Donald Tsang, launched a “Dress Down in Summer” campaign which would encourage Hong Kong civil servants to dress casual during the summer months which was promoted alongside the “Action Blue Sky” / Clean Air for a Cool Hong Kong” campaign. As such,

many professionals no longer were restricted to suit-and-tie formalities. They now have much more freedom in choosing their desired business attire than in any preceding generations.

Tsang also called on the business community to support and follow the notion of “Dress Down for a Cool Hong Kong”. Over the last two years, Hong Kong workers have been constantly educated, reminded and persuaded to make smarter and better choices on clothing consumption that would also help environmental concerns.

With this changing phenomenon, it is important to understand employee perceptions and attitudes toward casual business attire. In this present study, we intentionally set out to examine and uncover the thought and decision-making processes when an employee shops for summer business attire. Do they look for any specific product attributes? How do they perceive eco-friendly apparel products? Does an employee view eco-friendly as a salient determinant in purchasing business clothing?

Clothing Attributes and Consumer Perceptions

According to prior research studies, consumers tend to use various cues to evaluate a product, to form product impressions, to determine purchasing decisions, and to

produce desired perceptual responses (Jacoby *et al.*, 1971; Peter and Olson 1987; Richardson *et al.*, 1994; Schellinck 1983; Simonson, 1989; Szybillo and Jacoby, 1974).

In addition, many apparel literature also suggest that consumers often evaluate a product with both intrinsic and extrinsic cues concurrently (Hsu and Burns, 2003; Labhard and Morris, 1994; Wu and DeLong, 2006). Intrinsic cues are concrete characteristics directly related to the physical product such as colour, style, and fabric. Extrinsic cues are indirectly related to the physical product such as price, and brand name. In other words, extrinsic cues can be changed without altering the appearance and properties of the physical product. Some studies have found that intrinsic cues may play more important role on product evaluation than extrinsic cues (Szybillo and Jacoby, 1974; Wall *et al.*, 1991; Zeithaml, 1988).

Product Attributes

Today's consumer often seeks for multiple cues from a product to meet their needs and aspirations. For example, for their business casual attire, individuals may choose attributes such as comfort (functional), style (aesthetic), price (financial), and eco-friendly properties (social, psychological) that may satisfy their desired values. According to Martin's study (1971), 67 per cent of the participants expressed that product attribute information was a significant factor of purchasing decisions on dress.

Fabric and comfort

Sproles and Geistfeld (1978) revealed that many consumers place priority on comfort when judging satisfaction of apparel products. Other studies also reported that fit and comfort deemed critical for clothing consumption (Hsu and Burns, 2003; Labhard and Morris, 1994; Wu and DeLong, 2006). Comfort and fabric are highly correlated. The fabric quality such as type of materials used, weight and construction can affect the physical comfort for an individual. Natural fibres such as cotton, linen, hemp are known to “breathe”, and wick away perspiration from the body. Looser weave structures using finer yarns also contribute to keeping the body cool. Wearing these particular fabrics would also encourage a lessened need for an air-conditioned environment in the office place and should play an important role for business casual garments in the hot and humid summers of Hong Kong.

Colour

The desirability and appropriateness of colour application on apparel may vary between product types, situations, time and cultures (Whitfield and Wiltshire, 1983). For example, people may perceive dark coloured clothing appropriate for formal settings, whereas light colour clothings appropriate for casual situations. As DeLong

et al (2002) pointed out in their study of denim jeans, U.S. subjects perceived dark blue jeans were appropriate for more formal situations than light blue jeans. Another study (Morton, 1964) also suggested that dark or dull colour men's suit was typically associated with professionalism and masculinity in our society.

However, lighter colors reflect light, thus keeping the body naturally cooler. This is a major reason why lighter colors are worn in the summers. Darker colors absorb light and retain heat, and an individual has to "work harder" in order to keep cool when wearing dark colors in hot weather.

Style

The term "style" can be defined as the garment's silhouette and structure (Miller *et al.*, 2005) or the combination of features within a garment that create a distinctive appearance or "look" (Kunz, 1998). According to a study on women's blouses (Davis, 1987), style was one of the significant indicators of product quality and fashionability. Thus, style may play a critical role in the selection process of appropriate business casual attire. A suit, tie, and jacket (for men) and dress, blouse, skirt, jacket (for women) is the usual norm in the business environment. These tend to fit into a classic, conservative "look".

However, there are tendencies to push the boundaries of what business casual could mean. Sometimes, it may be difficult for a person to draw a line between appropriate and inappropriate. But there is a general consensus that there are a number of clothing styles often considered inappropriate in the business workplace. These can include super low-rise pants, halter/tube tops (too revealing or provocative), baggy or cargo pants, pre-torn garments, T-shirts and flip flops (too casual).

In terms of style, the concept of business casual might allow employees wearing short sleeve shirts/blouses, eliminating the stockings or panyhose requirement for women and neck ties for men. As such, it would help to keep employees cool while still maintaining a professional appearance.

Although today's employees have embraced a wider array of choices, and yet choosing appropriate clothes at work could be daunting and confusing. To summarize, the intent of this article is to contribute an understanding of appropriate summer casual attire in today's business community, and in relation to considerations towards environmental and energy concerns. It is also offer guidelines and recommendations on summer dress code policies in Hong Kong, and to identify opportunities for future directions.

Methodology and Measuring Instruments

The quantitative research method was chosen to identify and explore white collar employee behaviors and perceptions towards business casual attire in Hong Kong.

The final questionnaire survey was developed with nominal and Likert-scale questions to collect data from this core group. A number of government departments (e.g., the Environmental Protection Department, and Department of Health) were selected for this study, and questionnaires were sent to those departments via electronic mail. In total, 113 useable questionnaires were collected and descriptive analysis was used for this study.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part contained questions regarding the dress code policy, its availability in the work place and the forms in which the policies were conveyed. In Part two, 6-point Likert scale questions (anchored by 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree') were used to measure employee perceptions and attitudes toward business casual. The significant product cues of business casual were also selected and measured in this section. In total,

nine product cues were used for this study were encompassing price, style, construction, quality, durability, colour, comfort, coordination with other clothing, and eco-friendly properties. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one product cue. Part three measures consumer preferences toward business casual in three specific areas – garment style, fabrication, and brand name.

Analysis and Empirical Findings

The majority of our respondents (69.6%, n=78) were employed in an organization with more than 500 employees. 57.1 percent of respondents reported that a 'business casual' policy was available in their organization. Most of the respondents (60.7%, n=68) received a simple guidelines rather than a full written policy with visual images. According to our results, 42.9% of the respondents desired to have some kind of professional recommendations and guidelines for a 'business casual' dress code from their employer. Respondents who did not prefer any guidelines or policy numbered 13.4%, and 43.8% remained neutral.

According to the findings, 60.8% indicated that it was not difficult to decide what casual clothes to wear at work during summer. The majority of the respondents

(77.7%) did not have problems finding casual business clothing from the consumer market. In addition, 67.9% of respondents did not agree with the statement “there are fewer choices of business/smart casual fashion items in the market.” However, majority of the respondents (62.5%) found that some individuals had taken the notion of dressing casual too far and agreed that some people dressed too inappropriate and/or unprofessional for the corporate context.

Interestingly, 71.4% of the respondents said dressing casual at work during summer would not affect their professional image. They also believed that wearing casual attire could save energy, improve their sense of social responsibility, and offer a better and healthier lifestyle to the wearers.

In terms of the importance of product cues, comfort was the most frequently selected cue for evaluating and determining business casual attire, followed by quality and price. The least important cue was colour. Surprisingly, style and eco-friendly properties were ranked relatively low (as indicated in table 1) as well.

	Frequency	Rank
Comfort	104	1
Quality	99	2
Price	99	2

Construction	68	3
Durability	64	4
Coordination with other clothing	62	5
Style	35	6
Eco-friendly properties	35	6
Colour	14	7

Table 1: Ranking of significant product cues for business casual

As shown in Table 2 below, the results of this study also indicated that most of the respondents preferred casual short sleeve shirts/blouses and casual pants/skirts (e.g., khaki pants/chino trousers) for summer business casual. Neck ties, vests, jackets and sweaters rated relative low or insignificant for summer business attire (as shown in Table 2). Cotton and linen were the most frequently chosen fabric for summer season (Table 3).

	Frequency	Rank
Casual pants/skirts	71	1
Short sleeve casual shirt/blouse	68	2
Short sleeve formal shirt/blouse	49	3
Polo shirt	47	4
Formal pants/skirts	45	5
Long sleeve casual shirt/blouse	42	6
Long sleeve formal shirt/blouse	25	7
Jacket	23	8
Jeans	23	9
Knitted sweater	19	10
Vest	13	11
T-shirt	10	12
Scarf	7	13
Neck-tie	6	14
Shorts	6	15

Others	2	16
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Table 2: Ranking of appropriate clothing for business casual

	Frequency	Rank
Cotton	101	1
Linen	71	2
Silk	34	3
Organic fibre	21	4
Recycle fibre	21	5
Light wool	19	6
Hemp	17	7
Corn fibre	12	8
Bamboo	5	9
Paper	4	10

Table 3: Ranking of appropriate fabric for hot summer months in Hong Kong

In this present study, 65.4% of the respondents suggested that casual attire may not be appropriate for the senior executives. In terms of product attributes of business attire, comfort ranked the most significant attribute followed by price and quality. In this study, many respondents preferred casual pants (e.g., khaki pants/chino trousers) and short sleeve shirt to dress pants and long sleeve shirts. Neck tie, vest, jacket and sweater rated relative low or insignificant for summer business attire. In addition, three local brands (G2000, Bossini and Giordano) were ranked the top three favorite brands for business clothing.

Conclusion

Function vs. aesthetic values

According to the findings, it is evident that most of the respondents were concerned about the functional values of comfort and quality rather than the aesthetic values of style and colour in regards to business attire. The reason why the latter is less important is because consumers generally do not perceive these attributes to be a salient determinant for business attire consumption. As many prior researchers (Berry *et al.*, 1992; Hofstede, 1984; Oyserman *et al.*, 2008) have pointed out that Chinese society values collectivism – where interpersonal relationships and mass social orientation are most highly regarded (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961). In a collectivistic society, consumers tend to pay attention on the socio-cultural aspects such as prestige and conformity. People like to use clothing to associate themselves with their desired in-group members and to avoid not being accepted by others. In other words, desire-to-conform is an important criteria for buying decisions. Many Chinese consumers do not want to take risk of social disapproval for advanced or unique fashion image. They rather follow the mainstream fashion trend and conform to the acceptable social norm. As Wheeler *et al.* (1989) pointed out that Chinese stressed on harmonious interactions with others, whereas Americans focused on the expression of private self. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why most of the

Hong Kong white-collar workers prefer conventional business attire rather than the latest styles and colours.

The appropriateness of casual vs. formal

Due to the hot and humid summer weather in Hong Kong, the factor of comfort plays an important role on clothing evaluation and purchasing decisions. In this study, most of the male respondents indicated that they preferred casual business attire that include casual pants, short sleeve shirts and polo shirts. In addition, they disliked wearing jackets and neck-tie during the summer months. Female respondents preferred light-weight fabrics for skirts and blouses.

According to these results, we can conclude that the majority of business workers would choose wearing casual attire over formal attire. However, despite the preference for casual attire, maintaining a professional business standard was a high priority, and excluded the wearing of T-shirt and shorts. These clothing items were ranked relatively low because consumers generally did not perceive them to be appropriate for the workplace environment.

Concrete vs. abstract benefits: eco-friendly vs. non-eco-friendly

Many participants did not cite eco-friendly attribute to be an important evaluative criteria for business clothing consumption. Many consumers appear to focus primarily on the concrete benefits (i.e., function, usage) of clothing item and are less sensitive to its' abstract benefits (i.e., environmental well-being). Several reasons for this tendency may include:

1. 'Environmental consciousness' are credence quality attributes – there is no immediate or direct impact on the appearance of the wearer, or to the visual pleasure of the beholders. Thus, their benefits may not be directly or easily experienced and observed.
2. Consumers may only consider eco-friendly products on the condition that the price and quality must be maintained. In other words, if the price of an eco-friendly product is higher and/or the quality is lower than a non-eco product, consumers are reluctant or unlikely to purchase them.
3. Awareness of ecological issues and sustainability is still relatively low as compared with many Western counterparts. According to prior study (Martinson *et al.*, 1997), Hong Kong has been considered to be one of the most ecological and environmental unsound places in the world.

To summarize, during the summer months, business workers favour or support the

notion of dressing casual in the office in order to save energy and sustain the environment. However, instead of investing money on eco-friendly clothing items, they would rather adopt alternative clothing styles to achieve the goal, such as replacing long sleeves shirt with short sleeves, or abandoning neck-ties, scarves and jackets.

Limitations

This paper attempts to offer recommendations and insights to fashion practitioners on the issues of business attire in Hong Kong. Due to the size of this sample, further research is need. Moreover, a single study should not form a significant basis for generalizations of consumers' perceptions and attitude toward business attire, more replication is needed to provide stability for such conclusions. In order to extend this concept further, data should also be collected from the private sectors including local and international corporations. In addition, only ten pre-selected product attributes were used to measure the salient determinant on the perception of purchase intents. More specific eco-friendly attributes (e.g., visual stimuli) should be used in order to stimulate and generate more meaningful responses.

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