

Business organizations' awareness of the communicative properties of footwear: results of a pilot survey on the regulation of footwear with female employee uniforms in a major Polish city

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1. Introduction

A large number of studies have established the importance of apparel as a factor in image establishment and communication success. These studies have focussed on a range of occupational environments, including business [1, 2], education [3], counselling [4], and medicine [5, 6]. Partly as a consequence of such findings, a number of business organizations now lay down uniforms for their employees, or at least have guidelines as to what is, and is not, acceptable clothing for work.

However, although there have been many studies on the role of apparel, relatively few of them have focussed to any extent on the contribution of footwear. This stands in contrast to quite a strong interest in the non-applied literature on the role of footwear in communicating social and personality attributes. This function is implicit in the title of Mimi Pond's examination of footwear – "Shoes never lie" [7] – but has also been reiterated by other writers. Kramps, for example, has claimed that "in no other item of apparel is the personality so directly mirrored as in shoes" (my transl.) [8], whilst Herzog [9] and Günther et al [10] have also considered the expression of personality through footwear. In empirical terms, the study by Kaiser et al [11], which involved a focus group and a larger-scale questionnaire study, discovered that people relate to footwear not just on a descriptive and contextual level (talking about dimensions such as comfortable/uncomfortable or formal/casual) but also in ways that involve making social judgements about aspects of the likely wearer (such as liberal/conservative; unsexy/sexy; old/young; high-status/low-status). Recent work by myself and Katherine Brown has also established that respondents will make social and personality judgements on the basis of footwear in a far from random way: for instance, in an open-ended questionnaire study of potential passengers' attitudes to occupational footwear for flight attendants, 9 out of 21 participants (42%) associated knee-length boots with a negatively charged, overtly sexual image.

The aim of this small pilot survey was twofold: firstly, to find out whether business organizations tend to lay down any guidelines at all about acceptable footwear (in other words, whether they appear to be 'switched on' to the idea that image can be communicated through footwear as well as other clothing), and, secondly, where guidelines do exist, to discover what shoes and boots a range of organizations actually allow and forbid (thus providing some preliminary orientation as to the attitudes associated with particular styles within an occupational setting).

2. Method

A research assistant visited the premises of ten major commercial organizations in the Polish city of Łódź¹ during the summer of 2003 and administered a brief questionnaire concerning their dress regulations for female employee footwear. The companies were selected from the domains of hospitality, travel and transport, and banking, with the aim of contacting companies that laid down uniforms for their employees.

The questionnaire was in three parts. In part one, the respondents were shown a list of thirteen women's shoe styles and were asked to mark those which were (a) required, (b) permitted, or (c)

¹ Łódź is the second largest city in Poland (after the capital, Warsaw) and is a major trade and industrial centre.

forbidden with their corporate uniforms. In part two, the respondents were invited to provide, on an open-ended basis, any further information about their uniform shoe requirements (for example, permitted colours, designs, etc.), including any specific circumstances (such as seasons or activities) when particular styles are or are not allowed. In part three, the respondents were asked whether any of the shoes are specially designed and manufactured to match their uniforms or whether they are issued to or purchased by staff from standard public retail lines.

The shoe styles included in the questionnaire were:

- (a) Knee-length boot (medium/high heel)
- (b) Knee-length boot (flat heel)
- (c) Ankle-length boot (zip-up, medium/high heel)
- (d) Ankle-length boot (zip-up, flat heel)
- (e) Ankle-length boot (lace-up medium/high heel)
- (f) Ankle-length boot (lace-up, flat heel)
- (g) Pumps / court shoes (medium/high heel)
- (h) Pumps / court shoes (flat heel)
- (i) Loafer-style shoe (medium/high heel)
- (j) Loafer-style shoe (flat heel)
- (k) Flat lace-up shoe
- (l) Open-toe sandal (medium/high heel)
- (m) Open-toe sandal (flat heel)

3. Results

Out of the ten organizations approached, nine agreed to complete the questionnaire. These comprised three banks, two hotels (one local and one part of an international chain), a national travel agency, a national bus company, a national railway company, and an airline. Seven of the nine companies had regulations about the shoes which their female employees could wear with uniform at work. Two companies (both banks) had no shoe regulations: one did not prescribe an employee uniform at all and the other had no detailed regulations about shoes.

3.1 Styles

The only shoe style which was universally allowed was the flat-heeled pump. This style was also marked, more strongly, as 'required' by six of the seven companies which had regulations for employee footwear.

The next most commonly allowed styles were the high/medium-heeled pump and the flat-heeled loafer-style shoe, both forbidden by only two companies each.

The least accepted styles were sandals (regardless of heel height) and high-heeled ankle boots (regardless of whether they were fastened with a zipper or laces)². These styles were forbidden by seven companies. Indeed, the only companies which we indicated as allowing these styles were the two banks that had no stated rules about their employees' footwear.

In terms of boots, three companies – the two hotels and the travel agency – did not allow their employees to wear any kind of boot. The one bank which did have employee shoe regulations allowed its employees to wear flat-heeled knee-length or zippered ankle-length boots, but only outside during the winter. The railway company allowed its train personnel to wear either knee- or ankle-length boots in winter, but not its office-based staff. The same was true for the airline: only

² Retrospectively, we realize that we should also have asked about the choice between trousers and skirts, since this may explain the non-allowance of ankle-length boots.

flight attendants were allowed to wear knee-length boots, and this was only outside the aircraft in cold weather.

This distinction between ‘office’ personnel and ‘outdoor’ personnel extended beyond boots. In the case of the railway company, the only shoe permitted for office-based staff was a flat-heeled pump, whilst train-based personnel were permitted not only boots but also loafers and flat laced shoes. Similarly, in the case of the airline, flat- or high-heeled pumps were the only shoes allowed for office staff: the additional choice of boots and loafer-style shoes was restricted to cabin crew.

Respondents made two additional frequent comments about shoe styles. One was that very high heels were forbidden: this was clearly indicated when responding to the shoe styles – most of the questionnaires which indicated that the high/medium-heeled pump was required or permitted emphasized that this applied only to a medium-heeled variant. The other was that all shoes and boots should be of a plain design.

3.2 Colours

With the exception of special protective footwear (i.e. white kitchen clogs in the hotels), five of the companies surveyed only allowed black shoes. The remaining two companies which laid down guidelines also had black as one option, but gave employees the additional options of grey (in both cases) and dark brown (in one case).

3.3 Sources

Only two of the companies surveyed – the airline and the railway company – had their employee shoes specially designed and issued as uniform items. In all other cases, employees bought their shoes at ordinary shoe stores, in accordance with their company’s dress guidelines.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this preliminary survey suggest that business organizations are indeed aware of the communicative aspects of footwear. Only two out of the nine organizations which responded did not have any guidelines restricting their employees’ footwear at work. The remainder made sometimes very narrow restrictions on what was, and was not, allowed.

The general pattern of attitudes arising from the questionnaire findings is twofold. Firstly, companies’ attitudes to women’s footwear appear to be extremely conservative, with the majority only allowing their employees a plain (often flat) classic pump in black or, occasionally, another dark colour. Secondly, the allowance of other footwear styles appears to be grounded on a functional basis, only relegating image to second place for physical protective reasons. Boots, for instance, are only permitted for staff who spend some or most of their time working outdoors in colder, inclement weather. The same is true of flat shoes such as loafers and laced shoes. Styles which are more decorative than functional (e.g. open-toed sandals) receive no condonation at all.

Only two companies, both large national transport corporations, had their shoes specially designed and manufactured. However, this does not necessarily imply a lesser degree of concern on the part of other companies with regard to shoe style. It may simply be that there is comparatively little scope for affordable innovation in shoe design whilst keeping to a conservative image, such that specially produced shoes are not cost effective. (The shoes worn by flight attendants and railway employees are similarly not very innovative in design, despite being included in the uniform.)

This survey was carried out on a small scale and did not involve any qualitative discussion with those responsible for uniform design and the maintenance of grooming standards. It also excludes

consideration of customer attitudes. The latter are currently being examined separately with regard to flight attendant footwear. Similarly, we hope, in the future, to be able to obtain some qualitative data from policy makers. However, for the time being, this survey does show that companies appear to be aware of the potential for communicating professional image through footwear.

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