


Fall 12-2023

"Maybe I Shouldn't Have Worn Such High Heels" Examining Self-Presentation Expectations for Corporate Women Using Communication Theory of Identity

Taylor E. Mack

Follow this and additional works at: https://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/theses_dissertations

 Part of the [Business and Corporate Communications Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), and the [Other Communication Commons](#)

COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

“MAYBE I SHOULDN’T HAVE WORN SUCH HIGH HEELS”

EXAMINING SELF-PRESENTATION EXPECTATIONS FOR CORPORATE WOMEN

USING COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE

COLLEGE OF ARTS

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

BY

TAYLOR E. MACK

2023

Copyright © 2023 Taylor E. Mack

All Rights Reserved.

“MAYBE I SHOULDN’T HAVE WORN SUCH HIGH HEELS:”
EXAMINING SELF-PRESENTATION EXPECTATIONS FOR CORPORATE WOMEN
USING COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY

By

Taylor E. Mack

Committee Chair:

Dr. Benjamin Baker

Committee Members:

Dr. Tesa Leonce

Dr. Tiffany McBride

Columbus State University

December 2023

ABSTRACT

The present study examines how corporate women use self-presentation in the workplace to communicate professionalism. The study utilizes Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) to consider the self-presentation experiences of corporate women. CTI identifies four identity layers: personal, relational, enacted, and communal, which interact and influence each other as individuals attempt to define themselves. Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with corporate women, the present study found the following results: women often receive communication regarding self-presentation standards from peers rather than formal policies, self-presentation expectations have become more casual and diverse, women still encounter challenges resulting in the need to (re)negotiate their identity, and corporate women often experience personal-enacted identity gaps as a result of self-presentation expectations. This study contributes to the growing collection of academic literature that seeks to better understand the experiences of corporate women's gendered marginalization in the workplace.

INDEX WORDS: Communication Theory of Identity, Self-Presentation, Corporate Women

TO MY HUSBAND JEREMY

who always helps me feel secure as my true, authentic self

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
RELEVANT LITERATURE.....	3
How Women Communicate (Bodily) Professionalism.....	3
Gendered Workplace Stereotypes.....	6
Communication Theory of Identity.....	8
METHODOLOGY.....	12
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS.....	13
Communication of Self-Presentation Expectations.....	13
Changes to Self-Presentation Expectations in Recent Years.....	15
Self-Presentation as a Tool for Managing Identity and Combatting Stereotypes.....	16
Identity Management in the Workplace: Personal-Enacted Gaps.....	19
CONCLUSION.....	20
REFERENCES.....	24
APPENDIX.....	29

“MAYBE I SHOULDN’T HAVE WORN SUCH HIGH HEELS:”

EXAMINING SELF-PRESENTATION EXPECTATIONS FOR CORPORATE WOMEN
USING COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY

Since 2019, women have accounted for over half of the college-educated workforce in the United States (Fry, 2022). However, only 35% of top management positions are held by women (Gourtsilidou, 2021). According to a study by the Pew Research Center (2015), one of the biggest obstacles preventing female leadership in business is that women are held to a higher standard than men. Other challenges they noted included businesses not being ready to hire women for top executive positions, family responsibilities impacting the time women can devote to work, women lacking the necessary connections, and women being less likely to ask for a promotion or raise. Another major hurdle women consistently face in the workplace is a double standard surrounding bodily presentation expectations for feminine professionals (Haynes, 2012; Tazzyman, 2020; Trethewey, 1999; Tsaousi, 2019).

Though offices across the United States have steadily loosened their official dress code policies, the cultural and societal expectations for women in the workforce have progressed slower (Quayle, n.d.). Self-presentation expectations for women go beyond attire and often include make-up application, hair styling, body size, and body hair removal (Haynes, 2012; Tazzyman, 2020; Trethewey, 1999; Tsaousi, 2019). Additionally, women’s demeanor, voice, and posture are also subject to stereotyping and criticism. Self-presentation for women in the workplace often means finding the balance between appearing dull, lazy, and unprofessional and appearing too made-up, sexy, or even exotic.

For instance, numerous studies on the subject of stereotyping suggest that professional women who fail to meet self-presentation expectations risk falling into harmful stereotypes in the

eyes of others (Atlermatt et al., 2003; Cuadrado et al., 2021; Fiske et al., 2002; Morgan et al., 2013). Women who are perceived as sexy are often also assumed to be incompetent, manipulative, and untrustworthy. Stereotypes like the *businesswoman* and the *career woman* were also assumed to lack warmth and relatability, and women who appear pregnant or motherly can face assumptions about their commitment and competence.

Research suggests that women frequently seek to control assumptions others make about them through body modification and physical presentation (Haynes, 2012; Tazzyman, 2020; Trethewey, 1999; Tsaousi, 2019). Women use attire, make-up, and styling to showcase their professional identity while being careful not to challenge gender norms and avoid sexualizations. Many women also use diet and exercise to control their body size in an attempt to avoid appearing undisciplined, lazy, or maternal. Additionally, women consciously try to control their demeanor in the workplace so as not to appear too weak or too aggressive; this is achieved through constant monitoring of their tone of voice, posture, and gestures. Women are acutely aware of the implications failing to meet self-presentation expectations can have on their career.

The present study seeks to explore the unique challenges women experience working in corporate organizations. The corporation is an all-encompassing legal word used to define any company owned and operated by many shareholders (CFI Team, 2022). Additionally, the term “corporate America” has a broader use that often defines business, commerce, and professional culture in the United States (DuWaldt, n.d.). For the purpose of the present study, the term “corporate women” will be used to identify interview respondents who are employed by medium to large business enterprises. Corporate organizations are inherently gendered and require women within them to continuously (re)negotiate their identity (Clamser, 2022; Kanter, 1993). For these reasons, studying the experiences of women working for corporations will offer

valuable insight into the challenges women encounter in a variety of gendered organizational settings.

This manuscript begins with an overview of previous research on self-presentation communication strategies used by women in the workplace, including several studies that have examined female body presentation across various professional contexts. Because understanding feminine stereotypes offers insight into women's need to negotiate their professional identities, additional research reports also describe common stereotypes women face within a gendered organizational culture. The Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) is then explored as a suitable lens to explain the current study's focus. Following the description of relevant literature, a description of the investigation's methodology is provided. The paper concludes with a discussion of the research findings.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

How Women Communicate (Bodily) Professionalism

A review of literature representing research from different academic fields has explored how women communicate professionalism through their clothing, body modification, speech, posture, and much more. Trethewey (1999) used semi-structured interviews with women in professional settings to gain insight into their understanding of self-presentation expectations. Participants in Trethewey's study were all members of the chamber of commerce women's association in a Southwestern metropolitan city. Nineteen interviewees were asked to describe how they display professionalism, how they define a professional body, how they are made aware of their own body in professional settings, and how their body enables or constrains them in organizational life. This study found three major themes among the participant's responses.

First, respondents felt that the professional body was a fit body. Respondents reported that fat, unathletic bodies were considered unprofessional and gave the impression of laziness. Fit bodies were, in contrast, more energized and showcased the employee's ability to "endure the requirements of work" (p. 433). Moreover, Trethewey's research suggests the professional woman's body must display nonverbal behaviors and actions that demonstrate her professionalism. For example, several respondents in the study explained the very intentional ways they lean in or lean back in conversation to communicate confidence while not appearing aggressive. Trethewey noted the inequality of this communication strategy saying, "In addition to learning the rules, ropes, and intricacies of their professions, professional women must also constantly attend to the details of sitting, walking, and moving professionally" (p. 436). Finally, Trethewey suggests that the female body must constantly control its excessive sexuality. Feminine bodies are often objectified, and respondents were fearful of losing credibility "as a result of their excessively sexual or undisciplined bodies" (p. 437). Professional women must adopt self-presentation strategies that "are at once, engaging, though not too inviting, soft but not weak, and interested but not threatening" (p. 438). Additionally, some women sought to avoid having fertile or maternal-looking bodies because "maternal bodies reveal a professional women's fertility, looming motherhood, and potential lack of commitment to the organization" (p. 438).

Haynes (2006) also used semi-structured interviews to provide insight into how female employees at large accounting or law firms throughout the US and the UK negotiated their professional identities through attire and dress as well as through "professional demeanor" which includes speech and manner. Participants disclosed that they were often conscious of how they utilized, maintained, or developed their bodies in order to fit more successfully into the

masculine culture of professional services firms. Haynes further described this juxtaposition saying, “society’s cultural expectations are that women embody softer, feminine attributes, whereas, in law, the nature of the work sometimes involves powerful advocacy which requires more assertive behavior” (p. 499).

As part of a larger investigation into the culture of female body modification, Tazzyman (2019) interviewed 30 women ages 18-25 regarding the changes women make to their self-presentation as they transition from university environments to professional settings. The research suggested that in the transition from university student to full-time professional, women typically adjusted their self-presentation and adopted more body modification practices. Tazzyman also noted that respondents explained professional attire expectation in negative terms more often than positive terms. Comments such as “groomed,” “presentable,” and “smart” were used to describe acceptable professional appearance while more specific descriptions were given for unacceptable appearance such as, “cleavage,” “hair all over the place,” “Nails three inches long,” and “obese” (p. 335). Respondents received guidelines regarding professional dress from colleagues rather than from organizational leadership (p. 336). Participants sought to control their womanly body and negotiate their female identity by, “presenting oneself with the right amount [of femininity] at all times, not too much as to not be taken seriously, but not too little as to transgress gender norms and expectations” (p. 338). In addition to negotiating femininity, participants identifying as Black also sought to control their association with the racial minority group by avoiding hairstyles, jewelry, and other aspects of self-presentation that affiliated them with Black-culture.

Tsaousi (2020) also sought to better understand the self-presentation practices of university women by conducting focus groups with female lecturers at several of UK

universities. Respondents were asked questions regarding how women in academia attempt to construct their professional identities through clothing and other aspects of body presentation. The overwhelming response by participants showed that women in academia felt constantly scrutinized by superiors, peers, and students based on their choice of dress. The participants expressed the need to negotiate their worthiness to teach at the university level and “play the game,” all while feeling subjected to “both staff and students’ gaze precisely because of how they dress” (p. 1819). Tsaousi concluded that women in academic work environments use dress as a “vehicle” for presenting themselves and determined that choice of dress was part of the way women “(re)construct and (re)shape” their professional identity (p. 1819). Although Tsaousi’s study focused on university lecturers specifically, her findings are similar to investigations that focused on women in business and other career fields.

Gendered Workplace Stereotypes

The fears and perceptions described by participants in much of the existing research into bodily professionalism for women is also found in studies in the field of stereotypes (Altermatt et al, 2003; Cuadrado et al., 2021; Fiske et al., 2002; Morgan et al., 2013). For instance, Cuadrado et al. (2021) conducted a study in the field of psychology to better understand the social consequences of common female stereotypes. Over 200 participants were asked to make statements about pictures of women dressed stereotypically *sexy* and women dressed stereotypically *professional*. The study found a clear difference between the assumptions made about the sexy woman versus the professional woman. Results showed that “presenting oneself as sexy impacts women’s careers by their being perceived as less competent, their generating fewer positive emotions, and the tendency to hire or promote them less often than women who fit the professional subgroup” (p. 19). Furthermore, researchers found that participants were far less

likely to offer help to the sexy looking colleague than the professional looking colleague, demonstrating that women risk alienation from their peers if they fail in their self-presentation. These findings are supported by previous research in the field of stereotypes.

Fiske et al. (2002) conducted a study evaluating a variety of stereotypes on their assumed *warmth* and *competence*. Some of the stereotypes included in this study were female-specific, namely Housewives, Sexy women, Feminists, and Businesswomen. Feminists and Businesswomen were assumed to be highly competent but lacking warmth. Sexy women were assumed to be lacking both competence and warmth. Housewives were given a high rating for warmth but low ratings for competence. Similarly, Altermatt et al. (2003) researched three subcategories of the female stereotype: career women, housewife, and sex object. These subgroups were evaluated on their perceived competence, power, moral virtue, and sexual virtue. The sex object stereotype was found to have low moral virtue and low competence, consistent with other studies previously discussed.

Morgan et al. (2013) further explored discrimination against women in the workplace by identifying four potential stereotypes against pregnant women: incompetence, lack of commitment, inflexibility, and need for accommodation. The results of this study suggest that hiring managers were more likely to express hostility toward pregnant job applicants than their nonpregnant counterparts. Findings from this study support the notion of a *mother-hood penalty* that explains the disadvantage pregnant women and mothers experience in the workplace (Bragger et al., 2002; Correll et al., 2007; Hebl et al., 2007).

Studies on female stereotypes provide insight into the risks women face in professional environments as they fight against harmful assumptions (Altermatt et al, 2003; Cuadrado et al., 2021; Fiske et al., 2002; Morgan et al., 2013). Women who are perceived as sexy or promiscuous

are considered less competent and less trustworthy. Women who appear professional and business-like risk being considered unfriendly and lacking warmth, also bringing into question their trustworthiness. Women who choose to pursue motherhood and present a pregnant body in the workplace also face harmful assumptions regarding their commitment and competence.

The previous literature highlights unique challenges corporate women experience regarding bodily professionalism. However, little is known about how corporate women in America develop, maintain, and communicate their identity, especially when it comes to beauty standards and presentation. As such, the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) serves as a useful theoretical lens to aid in better understanding this understudied area of the conversation.

Communication Theory of Identity

Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) was developed in the 1980s by Michael Hecht and colleagues. CTI explores how individuals build and maintain self-identity by communicating with others (Hecht, 2015). The theory assumes that individuals use communication strategically to create, reinforce, and change their identities. CTI seeks to explain identity as a complex and layered social phenomenon as opposed to previous views that saw identity as a single and unified definition of “self.”

CTI identifies four identity layers/frames: personal, relational, enacted, and communal (Hecht, 2015). Personal identity refers to how an individual defines themselves. Personal identity is most closely related to the traditional view of identity and involves a person’s image of self. Personal identity can also include group-based identities such as gender identity or ethnic/racial identity. Relational identity explains how a person’s identity can be defined by the relationship they have with others. For example, an individual’s relational identity may include titles such as

mother or boss. Additionally, relational identity can be explained in terms that are in comparison of other identities such as leader/follower or extrovert/introvert. Enacted identity is the performance of identity, indicating that behavior is defined by *who we are*. While enacted identity can be related closely to personal identity, it also can differ—especially when faced with situations where external pressures conflict with an individual's self-image. Communal identity, the broadest and most complex layer, explains how a society defines itself and its expectations. Communal identities can be as broad as a nationality or ethnicity or as narrow as a family unit. Furthermore, communal identity can be understood through media, organizational practices, or cultural rituals. Each layer of identity informs the others, causing identities to shift based on internal and external pressures.

CTI defines identity not by each person's individually layered identities, but rather by the interaction these layers have with each other and the communication that informs those interactions (Hecht, 2015). Thus, according to CTI, individuals are defined by a sense of self as well as by the perceptions of others. Identity is interwoven with the communication we have with individuals, groups, media, and society. In short, CTI sees identity as a form of communication and communication as an expression of identity.

Previous research using CTI suggests that layers of identity can sometimes conflict with each other. For example, an individual may present themselves (enacted layer) in a way that does not align with their self-identity (personal layer) in response to the values and expectations of a community of which they are a member (communal layer). Jung and Hecht (2004) label these contradicting layers *identity gaps*. Identity gaps are often a result of an imbalance of power. Those with less power are often forced to suppress an aspect of their identity in order to fit within the communal identity of the group in power. Scholars have applied the concept of

identity gaps to research regarding how individuals negotiate racial identity, faith identity, (trans)gender identity, sexual identity, as well as others (Compton, 2016; Drummond & Orbe, 2009; Leonard et al, 2022; Wagner et al., 2016).

Drummond and Orbe (2009) employed CTI as tool to understand how communication between people of different races affects an individual's personal, enacted, and relational identities. The researchers conducted focus groups with Black and Hispanic identifying persons to determine what identity gaps they experience as they attempt to negotiate their racial and ethnic identities. Results indicated that participants experienced a personal-relational identity gap when presented with questions such as “what are you?” and “where are you from?”. Respondents also reported a personal-enacted-relational identity gap when encountering communication that implies, “who are you trying to be?” (p. 83).

Leonard et al. (2022) used CTI concepts on a more interpersonal level by examining what identity gaps exist between couples who do not share the same faith. The researchers used in-depth interviews to discover that interfaith couples often experience personal identity dissonance, perceive partner identity dissonance, and struggles with the navigation of communal identity expectation within their faith organizations. Leonard et al. also identified communication strategies employed by the participants as they attempted to navigate the identity gaps. Wagner et al. (2016) also used in-depth interviews to apply a CTI lens to the experience of transgender individuals, exploring how they form and perform identity. Wagner and colleagues detected several identify gaps and discovered a number of strategies used by transgender individuals as a result of tensions between identity layers.

Most closely related to the research goals of this study, Compton (2016) applied CTI to the experience of sexual minorities in organizational environments. Similar to gender, sexual

diversity has increased in the workplace, yet discrimination and bias are still present within many organizations. The research found that participants experienced identity gaps between the communal layer of communication (organizational policy) and the relational layer of communication (coworker communication). These gaps resulted in mixed messages participants had to navigate as they attempted to fit in with the culture of the organization while managing their sexual identity.

CTI and identity gaps provide a useful framework for understanding how women negotiate their professional identity in the workplace. CTI can also help gain insight into how professional self-presentation expectations are communicated to women and what women communicate about themselves through attire and other aspects of their bodily presentations. Women may experience dissonance or identity conflict as they adapt their enacted identity to fit within the organizational culture of their workplace. They also may use enacted identity to combat negative stereotypes placed on women in professional environments.

Despite CTI's utility in exploring the negotiation of identity across a variety of contexts, there is a lack of research examining how corporate women use self-presentation to communicate their professionalism in the workplace. In order to further understand this topic, I am proposing the following research question:

RQ1: How do corporate women talk about their self-presentation experiences in the workplace?

METHODOLOGY

To assist in answering the research question, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 13 corporate women. The respondents were largely employed by medium to

large corporations in the southeastern United States. Unlike small businesses and organizations, employers with more than 50 employees tend to have more rigid hierarchies and formalized policies (OECD, 2023; Zhang, 2021). Their industries included healthcare, engineering, food and beverage, finance, technology, real estate, and transportation. Many of the respondents worked full-time in an office-like setting, while others worked primarily remotely. Most respondents worked in a hybrid model, splitting their work hours between home, office, and other work sites throughout the week. Of the 13 respondents, three self-identified as Black or African American, and two self-identified as Latina or Hispanic. The respondents ranged in age from 26 years old to 58 years old. Respondents had a variety of salaries, with the majority of participants making between \$76,000 and \$100,000 per year. The salaries reported by the participants were higher than the average annual salary nationwide, which according to Forbes Magazine is \$59,428 (Belle Wong, 2023).

I initially recruited respondents by contacting recognized professional women's associations such as the American Business Women's Association and the Network for Professional and Executive Women to ask for volunteers. I then employed snowball sampling by asking respondents to recommend additional corporate women to participate in the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Snowball sampling was useful in this study because of its ability to build trust between the interviewer and the interviewee through mutual contacts (Kahane, 2012).

I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews as a research method because this style of interviewing is conversational and flexible (Adams, 2015). Semi-structured interviews include a mix of closed and open-ended questions along with follow-up questions or probes. By using this style of interviewing, I was able to consistently ask each respondent about key topics in the study while being flexible enough to make the interview feel conversational, allowing the interviewee

to feel more comfortable. Some interviews were conducted in person and others were conducted virtually using Zoom. All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the respondent. I used Lareau's (2021) guide to interviewing to construct an interview guide, avoid common interviewer mistakes, and focus on listening to the respondents' stories and experiences. I completed interviews until saturation was reached.

Interviews were transcribed using GoTranscript's audio transcription services. The 13 interviews resulted in a total of 133 pages of transcription. The median interview length was 10 pages. All information was stored in a password-protected folder on a password-protected personal computer to protect the respondents' privacy. Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, I read through each transcript and identified emergent themes. Using constant comparative analysis, I identified several exemplars which are further described in the Discussion of Findings.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Communication of Self-Presentation Expectations

Most respondents cited several different ways they determine self-presentation expectations for their organization including formal policies, observation of coworkers, and inspiration from mentors and family members.

When asked about organizational policies related to dress code and styling, most respondents could name a few aspects of their company's formal expectations. They often responded with some aspect of dress that is either permitted or forbidden such as, "Our employees are actually allowed to wear jeans" (Reagan) or "You can't wear a t-shirt." (Jen). Respondents often describe receiving a self-presentation policy explanation when onboarded for

their corporate job. Some examples of this include a video presentation, employee handbook, or brief description from a superior. However, few respondents could recall the presentation policies being reinforced. They rarely received formal feedback from superiors or other organizational leaders as a means of correcting self-presentation.

Consistent with other studies regarding women's workplace presentation (Haynes, 2012; Tazzyman, 2020; Trethewey, 1999; Tsaousi, 2019), respondents' understanding of expectations for self-presentation were more often communicated through verbal and nonverbal communication with coworkers, friends, family, and mentors over organizational policies. One respondent, Tamra, described her understanding of workplace expectations saying:

I think the formal policies for my company give me the base framework, but I think it's all the things that are unsaid. It's the politics behind it. It's how you're looked at. It's the looks that you get when you go into the office. It's how you're approached, respected, and received from your colleagues or leadership on a day-to-day basis that really tend to define it even more. My company might say, "Oh, yes, this is appropriate. You're not going to get written up." However, there's a big difference between what is appropriate versus what is going to get you a promotion.

Most respondents described observing their peers and colleagues as a way of determining appropriate self-presentation. They described looking to others for guidance saying, "I just saw what other people did and how they dressed, and I followed that," (Amber) or "A lot of [expectations] come from what your peers are wearing; what appearance they give." (Kelly)

Others described receiving coaching from older women on how to present themselves in workplace settings making statements such as, "My mother made sure I knew how to dress for work" (Elaina). Similarly, some described themselves as a mentor for others saying, "I'm very mindful that I'm presenting myself in a way that younger women can follow" (Shannon).

Respondents received communication from their workplaces through policy and onboarding, but they used verbal and nonverbal communication with peers to inform their

presentation choices more than they used organizational communication. Their enacted identity in corporate settings was a direct result of their relational identity (how they view themselves in comparison to their colleagues, friends, mentors, and family) and their communal identity (how they perceive the organization's values and norms). Most often, they received feedback from peers through glances, comments, and conversations rather than feedback from managers or other policy enforcers. The norms and practices of individuals within an organization seem to have a greater impact on self-presentation expectations for corporate women than policy or formal dress codes.

Changes to Self-Presentation Expectations in Recent Years

Overwhelmingly, respondents described a changing corporate culture in recent years that is more casual and allows for more diversity. Many have seen changes to formal policies such as allowing jeans every day of the week (rather than just Fridays) and permitting more piercings and tattoos to be visible. Others also described changes to the informal expectations of their organization claiming that "Business casual is more the standard now" (Shannon) in contrast to the "old-school" expectations when women wore panty-hose, heels, and makeup every day.

Respondents often described their own presentation evolving over time as the cultural expectations shifted and they became more confident with themselves and their field. They explained that the common expectation for their presentation is to "dress for the day." Jen describes this saying, "[My presentation] has evolved over the years... If I have an important meeting, I try to wear black or dark attire". Another respondent, Emma, said, "Days I'm going to be customer-facing I put a little bit more effort in to [my appearance] ... on days when I'm not customer-facing, I tend to wear jeans or athleisure. I definitely dress a lot more comfortably than

I used to.” Dressing for the day seemed to be especially important for women who work in several different locations such as the office, home, job sites, and other off-site settings.

Additionally, women of color described becoming more comfortable with themselves and their natural presentation over the course of their careers. One self-identifying Black woman described this change by saying, “For the longest time, I felt like my hair had to be straight. I felt like I couldn’t wear natural hair as a Black woman. I felt like I couldn’t wear braids because... of the images shown in the employee orientation. This was also the image I saw in magazines and on TV” (Tamra) Amanda described a similar experience saying, “Now I appreciate the uniqueness of Black culture but at the time, when I was younger, I tried to separate myself from it. As I’ve gotten older, I’m more and more embracing that aspect of myself.”

Some respondents claimed this change to corporate culture was a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic when the majority of the corporate workforce shifted to working remotely. One woman even said, “The pandemic made us all a little lazy” (Camy). However, others noted that the increasing acceptance of casual work attire began before the pandemic. Perhaps the evolution of technology combined with the increase in remote working has influenced this change in expectations. It may also be that American culture, as a whole, is becoming more casual, diverse, and accepting of different styles, and corporate culture is just one aspect of this change. More research is needed to understand this recent change and its effect on workplace communication.

Self-Presentation as a Tool for Managing Identity and Combatting Stereotypes

Though respondents reported that corporate culture has become more casual for women’s self-presentation and more accepting of diversity, many still encountered challenges related to

discrimination and stereotypes. Respondents frequently used self-presentation as a tool to manage their identity in the workplace and combat harmful assumptions. Stereotypes respondents encountered in the workplace were consistent with previous studies in this subject area (Altermatt et al, 2003; Cuadrado et al., 2021; Fiske et al., 2002; Morgan et al., 2013).

Some women expressed concern over being seen as young, naïve, or incompetent. Kelly said she experienced people expressing sentiments such as, “I know you’re young, you’re a woman, you just don’t know what you’re doing.” Amber had a similar experience when she was told, “You’re really young. There is a middle school down the street.” Yet another respondent, Lindsey, said, “People tend to assume men are smarter.” To combat this stereotype, many respondents chose to dress more formally than the setting or policy required to communicate their professionalism and belonging. Respondents also frequently reported lowering their tone of voice and adjusting their speech to avoid this stereotype such as one woman who stated, “I think to me it’s very obvious that these men look down on the women who communicate in a way that seems naive or head in the stars. To counteract that, I respond to them in the most direct manner—echoing their attitude, directness, and firmness” (Kelly).

Respondents also reported encountering stereotypes related to being angry, difficult, or unpleasant. Several women recalled being told to smile more often, especially on video conferences and meetings. Others expressed the need to seem more flexible and agreeable compared to their male colleagues like Tamra who said, “There have been times that I’ve filtered my voice. Where I didn’t speak up in meetings or where I had to really tone down how upset I was or bothered because I didn’t want to be the angry Black woman.” The need to appear agreeable and pleasant seemed to be in direct competition with the need to appear competent and

confident. Respondents used a variety of self-presentation techniques including dress, body language, and tone of voice to manage their identities in response to these stereotypes.

Though several respondents expressed that workplace sexualization had improved over the years, many still sought to manage the way others viewed their bodies through self-presentation. Many respondents said they avoided dressing “overly sexual” and felt self-conscious about clothing items that seemed too tight or too short. Some also said they were very aware of how closely they stood next to colleagues or how they moved their bodies, concerned that they would be sexualized. Kelly described being at an after-hours work event where she felt several men looking at her. In that moment she thought to herself, “Maybe I shouldn’t have worn such high heels.” Often, respondents felt the best way to avoid sexualization was to adjust their self-presentation in workplace settings.

Through several different aspects of self-presentation, respondents sought to combat stereotypes related to their age, gender, or race/ethnicity. Through clothing choice, they were able to communicate professionalism and minimize assumptions about their competence and sexuality. They managed body language and movement to appear more agreeable and approachable. They also monitored their speech and tone of voice to avoid seeming difficult or angry.

Notably, several respondents felt that they encountered fewer stereotypes when working in organizations that had majority female leadership as opposed to majority male leadership. Lindsey said, “Especially if there is a hierarchy of male managers and leaders, they tend to think there could be more [difficulties] that come up with women.” In contrast, women who worked under female leadership felt that played a role in their ability to be more of themselves and be less concerned about stereotypes.

Identity Management in the Workplace: Personal-Enacted Gaps

The majority of respondents described gaps between the personal and enacted layers of their identity in response to self-presentation expectations in the workplace. However, these gaps seem to be narrowing, perhaps because of the increase in acceptance and flexibility when it comes to corporate self-presentation.

When asked how her personal presentation compared to their professional presentation Jen said, “Oh, night and day. As soon as I get home, I’m in a T-shirt and shorts, almost immediately actually. If I go out with friends, I probably wear shorts or jeans and a nice top. I almost never wear my work clothes outside of work.” Most respondents were able to name several aspects of their enacted identity at work, including their dress, mannerisms, and speech that contrasted with their personal identity.

Some respondents expressed that their enacted identity in the workplace had grown closer to their personal identity over time. One respondent, Amanda, explained this transition saying, “I have really, really worked hard to only have one version of [me] because there was a time when there were two versions of me, sometimes three. That is exhausting because there are so many masks that people put on, and I was tired of putting on that mask and, to a certain extent, that armor, because [my presentation] was used to protect me.” Amanda went on to say, “Once I decided to show up as me, I realized that’s who [my colleagues] wanted all along. That’s who added value—the person that has the different perspective.” The narrowing of the personal-enacted gap seemed to correlate with the time respondents spent in the position as well as the opportunity to work remotely more often. Changes in the communal identity, such as office culture and policies, also seemed to allow respondents to allow their self-presentation at work to align with their personal identity more closely.

CONCLUSION

The present study sought to explain how corporate women talk about self-presentation in the workplace. Extant research exploring the impact of stereotypes have identified several stereotypes women frequently encounter in the workplace (Atlermatt et al., 2003; Cuadrado et al., 2021; Fiske et al., 2002; Morgan et al., 2013). These stereotypes include assumptions that women are promiscuous, incompetent, lazy, manipulative, unapproachable, or unreliable. Cuadrado et al. and Morgan et al. each found that appearance and dress had a direct impact on the assumptions and stereotypes women encounter in workplace settings. In response, women use self-presentation to combat harmful stereotypes and reframe their identity in the workplace.

Although previous investigations (Haynes, 2012; Tazzyman, 2020; Trethewey, 1999; Tsaousi, 2019) on this subject matter have come from a variety of academic disciplines, this is the first to explore it from a communication studies perspective. More specifically, the present study investigated the self-presentation experiences of corporate women through the lens of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). CTI assumes that individuals use communication to create and adapt their identity. CTI identifies four identity layers: personal, relational, enacted, and communal. Personal identity is most closely related to how an individual defines him/herself in their own mind. Enacted identity is the performance of identity to others. Relational identity refers to the way an individual defines him/herself in the context of their role in other's lives. Examples of relational identity include labeling oneself as a mother or boss. Communal identity is the broadest CTI layer. Communal identity is formed through a person's association with a group, community, or society. The frames adapt and influence each other as individuals seek to define themselves and their place in the world.

Using the lens of CTI, the results of this study indicated that women seek to manage expectations and negotiate their identity in the workplace through self-presentation and body modification. Self-presentation is manipulated through attire, styling, posture, voice, and other aspects of bodily performance. Participants were aware of their need to manage their appearance in order to achieve recognition, respect, and fair treatment in the workplace. Through careful analysis of the data captured via semi-structured, in-depth interviews, participant responses demonstrated that corporate women often receive communication about self-presentation from colleagues and peers more than policy, self-presentation expectations have become more casual and diverse than ever before, women use self-presentation as a tool for managing identity and combatting stereotypes, and women often experience a personal-enacted identity gap when presenting themselves in the corporate workplace. These findings are consistent with other studies (Haynes, 2012; Tazzyman, 2020; Trethewey, 1999; Tsaousi, 2019) on women's self-presentation in workplace settings but also identify some changes in recent years.

Though corporations almost always have formal policies related to self-presentation, respondents often stated that they modeled their self-presentation on informal communications. They received guidance from peers, family, members, mentors, and colleagues. Respondents rarely received communication about their appearance from managers or other superiors. The majority of participants discussed a change in self-presentation in recent years. They claimed that casual business attire has become more commonplace. Additionally, respondents often chose to 'dress for the day' by choosing to present themselves differently based on the people and settings they anticipated encountering throughout the workday.

Women still encounter stereotypes related to competence, reliability, and belonging. Through attire, body language, voice management, and other aspects of self-presentation, women

work to avoid these assumptions. The discrimination women encountered in the workplace was consistent with similar studies that were conducted more than a decade ago (Haynes, 2012; Trethewey, 1999). Participants frequently experienced personal-enacted identity gaps when their sense of self conflicted with their workplace presentation. However, it is possible that these gaps may be narrowing as corporate culture becomes more casual and diversity becomes more widely accepted. Respondents with more work experience were more confident in their self-presentation and seemed to more closely reflect their personal identity through their enacted identity. Additionally, respondents noted that organizations, departments, and divisions with primarily female management allowed for more self-expression than those with primarily male leadership.

The current study had some limitations that may have impacted the research findings. All the respondents were located in the southeastern United States and the majority of participants lived in a mid-sized metropolitan city. Future research should consider whether the experiences of corporate women are the same in other regions of the United States or other countries. The women of color who participated in this study often discussed navigating self-presentation challenges related to race/ethnicity in addition to gender. Future studies that focus solely on women of one race or ethnicity may find even more interesting results. Additionally, the respondents represented a diverse set of industries. It may be beneficial for future studies to investigate self-presentation expectations for corporate women within particular industries.

This study contributes to a growing repertoire of academic literature that considers the experiences of minorities, imbalances of power, and the intersectionality of identity. By exploring the self-presentation experiences of corporate women through the voices of corporate women, the research findings can offer insight into how to improve gender interactions in the

workplace. Corporation leaders can apply these findings when developing culture-changing strategies, communicating expectations, and seeking to improve power imbalances. By better understanding the experiences of women in corporate organizations, we can better understand corporate culture as a whole.

REFERENCES

- Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews. In K. E. Newcomer, H. P. Hatry, & J. S. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* (4th ed., pp. 492–505). essay, Jossey-Bass.
- Altermatt, T. W., DeWall, C. N., & Leskinen, E. (2003). Agency and virtue: Dimensions underlying subgroups of women. *Sex Roles, 49*(11/12), 631–641.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/b:sers.0000003133.90488.71>
- Belle Wong, J. D. (2023, November 8). *Average salary by state in 2023*. Forbes.
<https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/average-salary-by-state/#:~:text=Average%20Annual%20Salary%20Across%20the,Average%20annual%20salary%20nationwide%3A%20%2459%2C428.>
- Bragger, J. D., Kutcher, E., Morgan, J., & Firth, P. (2002). The effects of the structured interview on reducing biases against pregnant job applicants. *Sex Roles, 46*, 215–226.
[doi:10.1023/A:1019967231059](https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1019967231059)
- CFI Team. (2022, December 2). *Corporation*. Corporate Finance Institute. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/accounting/what-is-corporation-overview/>
- Clamser, R. T. (222AD). *Gendered Organizations: A Qualitative Study of Women's Experiences Navigating the Culture of Gender Bias and Stereotypes in the Profession of School Business*. ProQuest LLC.

- Compton, C. A. (2016). Managing mixed messages: Sexual identity management in a changing U.S. workplace. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 30(4), 415–440.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318916641215>
- Correll, S. J., Benard, S., & Paik, I. (2007). Getting a job: Is there a motherhood penalty? *American Journal of Sociology*, 112, 1297–1339. doi:10.1086/511799
- Cuadrado, I., López-Rodríguez, L., Brambilla, M., & Ordóñez-Carrasco, J. L. (2021). Active and passive facilitation tendencies at work towards sexy and professional women: The role of stereotypes and emotions. *Psychological Reports*, 003329412110581.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941211058149>
- Drummond, D., & Orbe, M. (2009). “Who are you trying to be?”: Identity gaps within intraracial encounters. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 10(1), 81–87.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17459430903236098>
- DuWaldt, B. (n.d.). PDF. The University of Akron College of Business Administration.
- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J., Glick, P., & Xu, J. (2002). A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: Competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(6), 878–902.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.6.878>
- Fry, R. (2022, October 12). *Women now outnumber men in the U.S. college-educated Labor Force*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/09/26/women-now-outnumber-men-in-the-u-s-college-educated-labor-force/>
- Gourtsilidou, M. (2021, June 6). *Women in business: The percentage of women in senior management positions increased in 2021 worldwide*. CEOWORLD magazine. Retrieved

January 31, 2023, from [https://ceoworld.biz/2021/06/06/women-in-business-the-percentage-of-women-in-senior-management-positions-increased-in-2021-worldwide/#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20in%202017%20the,level%20\(35%25\)%20in%202020](https://ceoworld.biz/2021/06/06/women-in-business-the-percentage-of-women-in-senior-management-positions-increased-in-2021-worldwide/#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20in%202017%20the,level%20(35%25)%20in%202020)

Haynes, K. (2011). Body beautiful? Gender, identity and the body in professional services firms. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 19(5), 489–507. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2011.00583.x>

Hecht, M. L., Braithwaite, D. O., & Schrodt, P. (2015). In *Engaging Theories on Interpersonal Communication: Multiple Perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 175–187). essay, SAGE Publications, Inc.

Hebl, M. R., King, E. B., Glick, P., Singletary, S. L., & Kazama, S. (2007). Hostile and benevolent reactions toward pregnant women: Complementary interpersonal punishments and rewards that maintain traditional roles. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92, 1499 – 1511. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.92.6.1499

Jung, E., & Hecht, M. L. (2004). Elaborating the communication theory of identity: Identity gaps and communication outcomes. *Communication Quarterly*, 52(3), 265–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463370409370197>

Kahane, J. (2012, November 7). Snowball Sampling. *The Wall Street Journal*.

Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and women of the Corporation* (1993rd ed.). Basic Books.

Lareau, A. (2021). *Listening to people: A practical guide to interviewing, participant observation, data analysis, and writing it all up*. The University of Chicago Press.

- Leonard, A., Ting-Toomey, S., & Dorjee, T. (2022). “If you were a good Christian . . .”: Navigating identity gaps in intrafaith romantic relationships. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, (Spring 2022), 5–24.
- Morgan, W. B., Walker, S. S., Hebl, M. (M.), & King, E. B. (2013). A field experiment: Reducing interpersonal discrimination toward pregnant job applicants. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 98(5), 799–809. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034040>
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2013). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- OECD (2023), Enterprises by business size. doi: 10.1787/31d5eeaf-en
- Pew Research Center. (2020, August 7). *Chapter 3: Obstacles to female leadership*. Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/01/14/chapter-3-obstacles-to-female-leadership/>
- Quayle, A. (2018, October 18). *Unequal burden: Dress code expectations on women in the workforce*. Her Culture. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.herculture.org/blog/2018/10/18/unequal-burden-dress-code-expectations-on-women-in-the-workforce>
- Tazzyman, A. (2020). Women's self-presentation and the transition from classroom to workplace. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27(3), 327–346. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12375>

- Trethewey, A. (1999). Disciplined bodies: Women's embodied identities at work. *Organization Studies*, 20(3), 423–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840699203003>
- Tsaousi, C. (2019). That's funny ... you don't look like a lecturer! Dress and professional identity of female academics. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(9), 1809–1820. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1637839>
- Wagner, P. E., Kunkel, A., & Compton, B. L. (2016). (Trans)lating identity: Exploring discursive strategies for navigating the tensions of Identity Gaps. *Communication Quarterly*, 64(3), 251–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2015.1103286>
- Zhang, A. (2021, May 29). *The main differences between small businesses and big businesses*. Girls For Business. Retrieved February 14, 2023, from <https://girlsforbusiness.org/index.php/blog/item/the-main-differences-between-small-businesses-and-big-businesses#:~:text=Larger%20businesses%20tend%20to%20have,a%20single%20person%20in%20charge.>

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Examining Self-Presentation Expectations for Corporate Women using Communication Theory of Identity (CSU IRB# 23-039)

Columbus State University
Department of Communication

Thank you so much for talking with me today. I am going to ask several questions about your experience with self-presentation in your corporate working environment. Self-presentation in this context includes anything you do to appear professional to others in your workplace.

Before we get started, may I first ask, are you comfortable having our conversation recorded? If so, I will begin recording now. If not, I will take notes during the interview. [If yes, then hit record meeting button].

Next, let's review the informed consent form mailed to you. [Review the document with them] What questions do you have? [Once all questions have been addressed...] Ok, so after reviewing the form, do you consent to continue with the interview at this time? [If yes, then continue. If not, end the meeting]

Also, just a reminder that if any time you do not feel comfortable answering a particular question, please let me know and we can move on to the next one.

Ok then, let's get started.

Main questions

Tell me about your job.

What are your job responsibilities in a typical workday?

How do you get along with your coworkers?

What do you like most/least about your job?

What is your typical morning routine when getting ready for work?

How do you decide what to wear?

How often do you wear make-up? How much do you apply?

How do you style your hair?

Is there other bodily maintenance you attend to weekly, monthly, or yearly specifically for your job?

How would you define a professional-looking woman? Can you provide some examples?

What would make a woman look unprofessional?

How do you determine what is appropriate attire and style at work?

Are there any formal policies regarding dress code or body presentation at your job?

If yes, how have those policies been communicated to you?

If no, how would you know if your appearance was unacceptable?

Can you think of a time when you received positive feedback from your choice of clothing or style?

Who communicated the positive feedback? What did they say?

How did you feel in that moment and how did you respond to the feedback?

Can you think of a time when you received negative feedback from your choice of clothing or style?

Who communicated the negative feedback? What did they say?

How did you feel in that moment and how did you respond?

Did that experience lead you to change your professional look? How so?

Can you recall a time when you were made aware of your body in a workplace setting?

How did you feel in that moment?

How did that experience impact your work?

Did you react/respond in any way? If so, how?

Have you ever experienced being stereotyped in your job?

How did you react to that situation?

Were you concerned that stereotype could impact your professional image?

How do you use your physical appearance to avoid stereotypes?

As an employee, do you feel you help determine what is considered professional presentation at your place of work?

How do you influence professional appearance policies (formal/informal) in your job?

Do you ever communicate to other workers?

that their appearance is acceptable or unacceptable?

How does your professional attire and demeanor differ from your personal style and mannerisms?

Background/Demographics

Where do you currently work?

How long have you worked there?

What is your job title?

How long have you held that title?

Have you held any other positions at the company?

If you work in a supervisory role, how many employees do you directly oversee?

What race/ethnicity do you most identify with?

How old are you?

What is your highest level of education?

If you are comfortable disclosing, what is your annual salary?

- a. Under \$30,000
- b. 31,000-75,000
- c. 76,000-100,000
- d. 100,000+

That concludes my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add? Would it be okay if I contacted you in the future once I have completed my interviews and analysis to briefly go over my findings – this would take no more than roughly 10 minutes of your time.

Thank you so much for talking to me today. (Turn off recording)

Last Revised: April 25, 2023