**Dress and its effect as employees work-from-home during COVID-19**

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**Introduction**

People “dress to impress,” especially in the workplace. However, what happens when the entire workplace must transition from working in an office to working from home? Will this transition change the ways dress codes are incorporated into work environments? The purposes of this study were (a) to investigate employee choices in daily dress practices while working from home during COVID-19 and, (b) examine how those choices affect their self-perceived quality of work, work ethic, and motivation, and feelings of well-being. This research offers novel insights on a contemporary issue from employees’ perspectives.

**Relevant Theoretical Framework and Pertinent Literature**

We framed our study and findings using impression management as conceptualized by Goffman (1956) to consider the implications around employees’ needs to fulfill their socially defined identities through work dress. Impression management theory posits that human ego identifies with a particular part of a group to conceptualize one’s best self (Goffman, 1956). Within the impression management framework, disruptions, as was experienced with COVID-19, can leave individuals with a discredited sense of self (Biddle, 1986; Goffman, 1956). The social psychology of dress affects one’s ideas about the self as well as self-directed behaviors (Johnson et al., 2014; Johnson & Lennon, 2015). Drawing upon the notion of discredited self, we sought to better understand how a lack of dress code, while working at home, affects employees in four areas: quality of work, work ethic, motivation, and feelings of well-being.

While this study is exploratory relative to the COVID-19 pandemic, research about dress codes and working from home is not new (Peluchette & Karl, 2007). Further, throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, attitudes about dress codes, as well as working-from-home, have changed (Baker et al., 2007; Bloom, 2014; White, 2018). Research has documented companies’ belief that professionally dressed employees produce better quality of work. Research has shown that when employees are satisfied with their appearance, they deliver better service to customers (Tu et al., 2011). Appropriately-dressed employees also have been shown to exhibit greater work ethic (Kaplan-Leiserson, 2000), and engage in less provocative office behavior (Kaplan-Leiserson, 2000; Karl et al., 2013). By dressing down, motivation can be lost (Burgess-Wilkerson & Thomas, 2009; Sklar & DeLong, 2012) and hurtful behaviors, like calling off work, can increase (Kaplan-Leiserson, 2000). An employee with poor self-perceived impression management, can have lower overall well-being (Uziel, 2010), in part, because it can prevent individuals from having the confidence to interact with others (K. Johnson & Lennon, 2015).

**Methods & Exploration Techniques**

Two studies, a qualitative study (n = 20) performed in June 2020 and a survey (n = 116) performed in June 2021, examined employees’ attire while working from home. We use phenomenological observations in study 1 and descriptive statistical analysis and OLS regression to analyze study 2.

**Results and Implications**

From the employee perspective, responses indicated that working from home, without a dress code, had no negative affect on quality of work, work ethic, motivation, or feelings of well-being. This juxtaposition with the prevailing notion that a more formal dress code enhances work productivity is an important implication worthy of further investigation.

Both studies showed most respondents preferred to wear Athleisure while working from home (Study 1: 95%; Study 2: 64%). Study 1 respondents shared they feel clothing has a limited direct relationship to work productivity, especially while working from home. Participants more than appreciated the ability to choose their attire freely to accommodate comfort and maintain focus on work instead of their appearance. Study 2 did not find a difference in means between those who wore Athleisure and those who did not (i.e., dressed business casual or casual) for quality of work, work ethic, and motivation at *p* = 0.05. We find a marginally higher level of mental health among non-Athleisure wearers at *p* = 0.04, which was supported in correlation analysis. Linear regression results, which accounted for company policy and attire choices prior to COVID, pointed to a lack of associations between attire and the four productivity measures.

**Significance/usefulness of the research/scholarship**

This study and its results, performed under the COVID-19 pandemic, are almost as novel as the virus itself. Researchers have previously shown that businesses enforcing dress codes yield better work productivity (Kaplan-Leiserson, 2000; Slepian et al., 2015) and managers have had apprehensions about allowing employees to work from home citing a decrease in productivity (Bloom, 2014). However, as employers allowed employees to work from home, without a mandated dress code, suggested otherwise. Our study also suggested that the disruption of self, which would be have been expected as employees worked from home, was perhaps mitigated by other factors such as improvements in work quality and feelings of well-being. Further study, particularly with a larger and nationally representative sample, is warranted to identify specific factors affecting the relationship among the self, dress, and working-from-home productivity.

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